

THE TWELVE KINGDOMS

SHADOW OF THE MOON, THE SEA OF SHADOW



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Shadow of the Moon, a Sea of Shadows

A Twelve Kingdoms novel

by

Fuyumi Ono

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Part I

Chapter 1

[1-1] **A** pitch black world. The girl cowered in the darkness. Out of the empty nothing came the high, clear echo of a drop of water striking the surface of a calm pool. A cave, she imagined at first, except that she knew she was not in a cave. The darkness was too wide, too far and too deep.

A crimson light blossomed in the distance. The flames flickered and twisted, shifted in shape and form. The conflagration climbed higher, casting long shadows into the heavy gloom. The shadows of a countless horde of beasts, beasts that leapt and pranced as they ran from the fire. Apes, rats, birds. Every kind and species of creature.

And none that would ever be found in a children's book, their torsos too large and out of proportion, their coats colored red and black and blue.

They whirled like dervishes, reared and raked the air with pawing forelegs. It made the girl think of Carnival and people whipping themselves into an ecstatic fervor. But even as they danced and spun, their attention remained focused on *her*, the sacrifice they would bear joyously to the altar.

Four hundred yards away. Their mad and murderous intent beat against her like a hard wind. The monster at the head of the mob opened its wide maw in a jubilant howl.

She heard nothing.

Only the sound of a drop of water breaking the quiet surface of a pond.

Youko couldn't tear her gaze away from the rushing shadows. *When they reach me*, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, *they will slaughter me*. Tear her limb from limb and gnaw on her bones. But she couldn't move. There was no shelter to seek, no way to defend herself. The blood rushed in her veins, roared like the ocean in her ears.

In the time she watched, the stampede pressed another hundred yards closer.

Youko awoke with a start. Blinking the stinging sweat out of her eyes, she took a deep breath.

“A dream . . .” she said aloud.

Hearing her own voice confirmed that she was indeed awake. She couldn’t relax until she knew for sure. “It was a dream,” she said again. A dream. The same dream that had plagued her for weeks.

Youko looked around her room. The heavy curtains shut out the light. The clock on the bedside stand told her it was almost time to get up. She should, except her body felt like a slab of lead, her arms and legs as if mired in tar.

The dreams had started a month ago. In the beginning she’d seen nothing but the empty darkness, heard nothing but the falling water. She stood in the pitch black, the awful panic growing inside her, desperate to run away, run anywhere, but was frozen in place.

Five nights ago she’d awakened, screaming inside, haunted by the red glow and the shifting shadows and the black stain flowing inexorably closer. For the past three nights, she’d grasped the nature of the fearsome things running from the inferno.

Two days. It had taken two days for the strange beasts to separate themselves from the shadows. She picked up her old rag doll and hugged it to her chest.

They were so close.

In a month they had crossed the distance from the horizon. Tomorrow, or the day after, they would be at her throat.

What would she do then?

Youko shook her head.

It’s only a dream.

Even if the dream returned again and again for another month or more, it was still only a dream. But saying that didn’t calm the fear in her heart. Her pulse raced and her heartbeat pounded in her ears. Her breath burned at her throat. She clung to the rag doll as if to life itself.

She roused her body from the bed, put on her high school *seifuku* uniform, and

went downstairs. No matter how bad things got, she could manage the daily routine. She washed her face and walked into the kitchen.

“Morning,” she said.

Her mother was at the sink, making breakfast. “You’re up already?” She glanced back over her shoulder as she spoke. A look of concern crossed her face. “You’re getting red again,” she said.

For a moment, Youko had no idea what she was talking about. Then she hurriedly pulled her hair back from her forehead. She usually braided her hair before she came down to the kitchen. She’d combed it out the night before and left it undone.

“Why not dye it, just to see how it turns out?”

Youko shook her head. Her hair brushed against her cheeks. Her hair had always been unusually auburn for a Japanese. Exposure to the sun and water only bleached out more of the black. Her hair now reached the middle of her back. The ends were so light they looked pink.

“Maybe if you trimmed it a bit?” her mother pressed.

Youko didn’t answer. She bowed her head, quickly twisting her hair into three braids. Doing so darkened the tint somewhat.

“I wonder what side of the family you got it from,” her mother mused with a grim little sigh. “You know, your homeroom teacher asked me the same question. He even wondered if you were adopted. Imagine that! He thought it’d be a good idea if you dyed it, too.”

Youko said, “Dyeing your hair is against the rules^[1].”

Her mother busied herself with the coffee. “Then get it cut. At least so it won’t stand out so much.” She said in her matter-of-fact voice, “A girl’s reputation matters the most. She shouldn’t draw attention to herself or give anybody any reason to question her character. It’s not the kind of thing you want happening to you, that’s all I’m saying.”

Youko studied the kitchen table.

“You know how people look at your hair and raise an eyebrow. Stop at the

salon on your way home from school today and get it cut. I'll give you the money."

Youko groaned to herself.

"Did you hear what I just said?"

"Yeah."

Youko stared out at the charcoal-gray day brightening outside the window. It was the middle of February. The winter sky was cold and wide and cruel.

Chapter 2

[1-2] Youko attended an ordinary high school. Other than it being a private girl's school^[2], nothing exceptional could be said about it.

The school was her father's decision. She had done well in junior high and had aimed her sights higher. Her junior high guidance counselor recommended a better school. But her father didn't budge an inch. The school was close to home and had neither a disreputable nor a controversial reputation. It prided itself as strict and traditional. That was enough.

At first, even her mother was disappointed with the rank of the school. After all, she'd followed the results from Youko's high school practice exams. But her father soon had her agreeing with him. Once her mother and father agreed on anything, the argument was over.

Youko could have qualified for a better school a bit farther away. Among other things that school had much nicer uniforms. But it didn't feel right making a big fuss over the style of a uniform so she kept her mouth shut and did as she was told.

As a result, now well into her junior year, she possessed little of what might be called "school spirit."

"G'morning!"

A bright trio of voices greeted Youko as she entered her homeroom. The three girls waved to her from across the room.

One of the girls hurried over to her. "Hey, Youko, you got the math assignment done, right? Let me see it, could you?"

Youko made her way to her desk by the window. She retrieved the assignment from her satchel. Several more girls quickly gathered around and set about copying down her answers.

"You're such a good student, Youko. No wonder you're class president."

Youko shook her head self-consciously.

“No, really! I hate homework! It’s all in one ear and out the other.”

“Yeah, me too. The second I start thinking about it, I don’t understand a thing. It’s like watching paint dry. Puts me to sleep. I wish I was smart like you.”

“I bet you didn’t even have to crack the book.”

“No, it’s not like that at all.”

“You really like to study, huh?”

“Don’t be silly.” Youko made a show of being outraged at the remark. “It’s my mom. She’s always on my case.”

That wasn’t true. Her mother wasn’t strict with her about schoolwork. But it was best to go with the flow. “She checks my homework every night,” Youko lied. “I can’t stand it.”

If anything, Youko’s bookishness annoyed her mother. It wasn’t that she didn’t care whether her daughter got good grades or not. It simply wasn’t a priority. “If you’ve got time to study all day, then you’ve got time to do your chores, too.” That was her favorite saying these days.

And it wasn’t that Youko cared for studying either. The disapproval of her teachers terrified her far more than any intellectual challenge.

“That bites, checking your homework every night.”

“I know, I know. My parents are the same way. They expect to see me studying every waking minute. No normal person can stand studying that much!”

“Totally.”

Youko nodded, if only from relief that she was no longer the topic of conversation.

Behind her someone said in a stage whisper, “Hey, it’s Sugimoto.”

The gaze of everyone in the room lit upon the girl who’d just come in. And in the same instant fell away. A wave of cool aloofness washed into the void. Over the past six months, shunning Sugimoto had become the sport of those in that class who mattered. Sugimoto stared back for a moment, a deer caught in the headlights, then shuffled over to where Youko was standing. She sat down at the

desk to her left.

“Good morning, Youko,” she said.

She spoke politely. Youko started to answer, only as a reflex, then choked off her reply. Once, not long ago, she had inadvertently exchanged pleasantries with Sugimoto. Afterwards her classmates had piled scorn upon her.

So she said nothing, acted as if Sugimoto weren't there at all. The other girls began to titter. Sugimoto bowed her head but didn't look away. Youko felt her eyes on her. To hide her discomfort she made a show of engaging in the patter of conversation.

She might feel sorry for Sugimoto, but go against the rest and the next time she'd be *it*.

“Um . . . Youko?”

Youko pretended not to hear. She knew what she was doing was heartless but couldn't imagine any other recourse.

Sugimoto persisted. “Youko,” she said.

The conversation stopped. As one, the circle gathered around Youko's desk turned its attention on the girl. Youko could not fail to follow suit and found herself meeting Sugimoto's upturned gaze.

“Did . . . did you finish the math assignment?”

The timidity in the girl's voice launched the circle into another fit of giggles.

Youko struggled for an appropriate response. “I . . . sort of, I guess.”

“Could you let me see it, please?”

The math teacher always assigned a student to explain the previous night's homework assignment. It occurred to Youko that Sugimoto's turn was coming up today. She glanced around the circle. No one said a thing. They answered her with the same hard looks they reserved for Sugimoto. Youko understood at once that they were waiting to see how she was going to rebuff Sugimoto's plea.

Youko swallowed the hard lump in her throat. “I . . . I still need to check it over for mistakes.”

The roundabout refusal did not impress her companions. “Oh, Youko,” one of them piped up, “you’re such a pushover.”

A voice filled with disapproval and reproach. Youko cringed inside. The rest of the group chimed in.

“You’ve got to be more direct than that, Youko.”

“She’s right. A person in your position can’t leave any room for doubt.”

“Else you’ll end up surrounded by idiots who can’t take no for an answer.”

Youko had no idea what to do. She lacked the courage to openly betray their expectations. At the same time, she lacked the disciplined indifference required to hurl at the girl the kind of words they wanted to hear. Finally she responded with a nervous laugh.

“I’m sure . . .”

“It’s true! You’re too nice all the time. That’s why nobodies like her are always glomming onto you.”

“But I’m class president.”

“That’s why you’ve got to stick to your guns. You’ve got *real* responsibilities, after all. You can’t get distracted by every pest that comes along.”

“I suppose.”

“That’s right.” A thin, wicked smile creased the girl’s lips. “Besides, if you give Sugimoto your notes, she’ll get them all . . . *dirty*.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t want that.”

The circle dissolved into another round of vicious mirth. Youko joined in the laughter. But not before she noticed out of the corners of her eyes the girl’s bowed head, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

It’s her fault too, she instructed herself. People like her didn’t get picked on for no reason. There was always a reason. *They bring it on themselves*.

Chapter 3

[1-3] **W**ithin the infinite dusk there was no heaven, no earth. Only the high, hollow sound of each falling drop of water. Youko saw the thin, crimson glow in every direction, the writhing shadows, the strange beasts galloping towards her.

Less than two hundred yards separated them. Their sheer size collapsed the distance further. There was a monkey amongst the menagerie, its mouth agape in silent, raucous laughter, its fur glistening in the red light. It was so close that with each leap and bound she could see the flex and draw of sinew and muscle.

She stood rooted, dumb and immobile. As much as she tried to avert her gaze, she could only watch the cavorting menagerie. The smell of death was thick on the wind and it choked her.

I must wake up.

She had to rouse herself from the dream before they reached her. Even as she repeated the mantra to herself, she couldn't think of anyway to do so. If will alone was enough, she would have done it already.

While she stood there helplessly the distance between them was halved again.

I must wake up.

A frantic desperation possessed her. The panic coursed through her body and crawled along her skin. She gulped for air. Her heart pounded. Her blood thundered in her ears.

What happens if I can't escape?

In that same moment she felt a presence above her head. A crushing bloodlust engulfed her. And yet, for the first time in the dream she found that she could move. She looked up at tawny wings, limbs of the same color. Scaly feet tipped with razor-sharp claws. She didn't have time to contemplate escape. An ocean roar filled her body.

She screamed.

"Youko!"

She fled. She did not think about how to escape. Her body simply fulfilled the desire. She bolted and ran. Only afterwards did she stop to take in the landscape around her.

And the startled look on her teacher's face, the wide eyes of her classmates.

She was standing several steps back from her desk. It was the middle of English class. She breathed a deep sigh of relief, then reddened with embarrassment.

A beat, and a gale of laughter swept the room.

She'd fallen asleep. The dreams were turning her into an insomniac. She often found herself nodding off at school. But the nightmares had never visited her before in the daytime.

Her teacher strode towards her. Youko anxiously bit her lip. She usually had no problems ingratiating herself with her teachers, but for some reason this one resisted. No matter how accommodating and subservient Youko tried to be, her English teacher remained stubbornly antagonistic towards her.

The teacher tapped on the desktop with the corner of the textbook. "I accept that a student may try to steal a few winks in one of my classes now and then, but this is a first, Miss Nakajima. Will you bring a pillow to school next time? I'd hate to think that our uncomfortable desks might cause you any distress."

Youko bowed her head and returned to her desk.

"Of course, one has to wonder what you think school is for? Silly me, believing that students should do their sleeping at home. Then again, if you find your classes so tiresome, there's no need for you to show up at all, is there?"

"I . . . I'm sorry."

"Or are you perhaps too *busy* at night to get any sleep at all? Is that it?"

The remark produced an eruption of laughter, some of it from her friends. Youko even heard a restrained giggle from Sugimoto.

The teacher casually picked at Youko's braids. "Your hair, it's naturally this color?"

"Yes."

“Really? A friend of mine in high school, she was a redhead, too. More so than yours, even. You remind me of her.” She smiled to herself. “During her senior year, she ended up in juvenile court and had to drop out. Whatever became of her? Ah, it was such a long time ago . . .”

Stifled laughter rippled around the room.

“So, are we ready to starting paying attention, Miss Nakajima?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“In any case, you’d better stand there for the rest of the class, to help you stay awake.” She sniffed to herself, quite amused at her half of the exchange, and paced back to the front of the room.

Youko stood by her desk for the remainder of the hour. The muffled laughter didn’t completely die down.

Her performance in English class was duly reported. That afternoon she was called down to the office for a grilling about her personal life.

The vice-principal was a middle-aged man with a perpetually furrowed brow. He said, “In fact, a number of teachers believe you might be engaging in some, ahem, *extracurricular* activities. Can you think of anything in that regard that might be relevant to your recent behavior?”

“No.” It was neither the time nor the place to start explaining about her dreams.

“So you’re staying up late, say, watching television?”

“No, I . . .” Youko grasped for a good excuse. “I . . . my midterm exam scores, they weren’t so good.”

The vice-principle bit down on the bait. “Ah, yes, indeed. True, your grades have slipped recently.”

“Yes.”

“You of course understand that burning the midnight oil will only prove counterproductive if you can’t pay attention in class.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no, no, I’m not looking for apologies. Unfortunately, Miss Nakajima, people jump to the wrong conclusions about the most innocent things. They see the color of your hair, and, well, you know . . .”

“I was thinking of getting it cut today.”

“Oh?” He nodded in agreement. “It is harsh, I know. But as disagreeable as the rules might appear at times, we’re only acting in your best interests.”

“Yes.”

He shook her hand. “Well, that’s all. You can leave.”

Youko replied with a perfunctory bow. “Excuse me,” she said.

Behind her a man raised his voice.

Chapter 4

[1-4] He said, "I have found you."

His presence was accompanied by the faint scent of the ocean. The vice-principal stared in amazement. When Youko glanced over her shoulder, the man confirmed, "*It is you.*"

She guessed he was in his mid-twenties. Everything else about him was breathtaking. He was wearing a long slicker like a cloak about his shoulders. His hair, an astonishingly golden sheen, curtained a marble-like face and reached to his knees.

She had never seen him before.

"And who are you?" the vice-principal demanded.

The stranger ignored him and instead did something even more astonishing. He knelt at Youko's feet and bowed his head low to the ground. "That which was sought has been found."

"Do you know this person?"

Youko shook her head. "I don't. I don't!"

As they stood there in confusion the man sprang to his feet. "We must go."

"Go?"

"Miss Nakajima, what is this about?"

"I don't know!"

Around them, the handful of remaining teachers and office personnel exchanged curious looks. Youko cast a pleading, helpless look at the vice-principal, who drew himself up to his full height. "Young man, you are trespassing on school grounds. I must ask you to leave this minute!"

The stranger's face was a mask of indifference. He said coolly, no enmity in his voice, "It is none of your concern." He surveyed the office with the same eyes. "Do not interfere, any of you."

The imperial register of his voice had the immediate effect of leaving them speechless. He turned his gaze on the equally amazed Youko. "I shall explain to you later. But we must leave now."

"What are . . . ?"

A voice, close by, interrupted her question.

"Taiho."

He lifted his head as if his name had been called. "What is it?" he asked into the thin air. Concern darkened his face.

From somewhere and nowhere the voice echoed again. "The enemy is at the gates."

A fierce expression replaced his impassive countenance. Nodding in comprehension he took Youko by the wrist. "Forgive me," he said, "but this place is too dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"There is no time to explain. They will arrive any second."

Youko shrank from him, filled with an inarticulate dread. "Who's they?" she cried.

She was about to ask again when the disembodied voice said, *"They're here."*

The window nearest Youko exploded.

She closed her eyes and heard a shrieking howl. The fragments of glass rained down around her.

"What was that!?"

Youko opened her eyes at the sound of the vice-principal's voice. Everyone in the office crowded to the windows. A cold winter wind rushed in from the broad river just beyond the school grounds. Carried on the breeze was the strong scent of slaughter and the sea.

Glass littered the floor around her feet. Despite being closest to the window she was untouched.

"How . . . ?"

Before she could make any sense of the situation, the stranger addressed her. "It is as I warned. Something wicked this way comes." He took hold of her arm. "Follow me."

A desperate panic overcame her. Youko struggled but the stranger simply dragged her along. When she tripped and staggered, he slung his arm around her shoulders. The vice-principal stepped in front of them.

"Are you responsible for this?"

The timber of the stranger's voice took on a stone cold menace. "You are irrelevant. Stand aside."

"Not before you explain yourself, buddy. What are you doing with Miss Nakajima, here? This some kind of gang thing?" He shot an accusing look at Youko, "What have you gotten yourself involved in?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"And him?" he said, gesturing to the man.

Youko saw the far more terrifying conclusions drawing together in the vice-principal's eyes: *they were in this together*. "I don't know him! I swear!"

She twisted away, jerked her arm free of his grasp. At the same time, from above and beyond them, the voice called again, this time with greater alarm.

"*Taiho!*"

The people in the office glanced at each other, as if to discern the source of the voice.

The stranger scowled at Youko in obvious frustration. "Must you be so obstinate!" Before Youko could react or reply he dropped to his knees and grasped her feet in supplication. "Your Highness, I pledge to you my eternal fealty." He spoke quickly, his eyes not wavering from hers. "I ask you to accede."

"To w-what?"

"Is not your life precious to you? Say that you accede!"

Too stunned to coherently consider what he was asking, and overwhelmed by the intensity of his words, Youko found herself nodding despite herself. "I

accede,” she said.

What he did next left Youko completely dumbfounded.

A beat—and a chorus of voices arose in objection. “What’s with you two? Are you nuts?”

Thunderstruck, Youko watched as this man—whom she had never seen before in her life—dropped his head in worship and touched his forehead to the instep of her foot. “What are you . . .” she started to say, but was cut off mid-sentence.

Her senses reeled. She felt something coursing *through* her. Her vision momentarily went black. A low rumble like an earthquake shook the room. The courtyard outside the windows fell into muddy shadows.

“Nakajima!” the vice-principal shrieked, his face apoplectic with rage. “What the devil is going on?”

Chapter 5

[1-5] A torrent of water crashed against the building and blew out the remaining windows. A wave strewn with icy shards swept through the room. Youko threw her arms up in front of her face. A flurry of tiny darts stung at her head and arms and body.

Her ears shut themselves to the violence of it all. She heard nothing.

The sensation of being caught in a whirling sandstorm faded away. She opened her eyes. Glass glittered on every surface. Those who had gathered at the windows now crouched in shock on the floor. The vice-principal was curled up in a ball at her feet.

Are you all right, she felt compelled to ask, until she saw that his body was studded with brilliant shards. He wasn't all right. The others were struggling to their feet, groaning. Youko had been standing right beside the vice-principal yet there wasn't a nick or cut on her.

The vice-principal seized her ankle. "Why?" he groaned.

"I didn't do anything!"

The stranger peeled the vice-principal's bloody hand from her leg. He was as uninjured as she. He said, "We must go."

She shook her head. If she left with him now they would all conclude that they had been in on it together, from the start. But the fear of staying there overcame her. She let him pull her along. *The enemy is at the gates*. That meant nothing to her. The horror of remaining there amongst the bloodied and wounded frightened her far more.

They fled the office and came face to face with another teacher. He shouted, "What's going on?" His eyes shifted suspiciously to the stranger.

Before Youko could respond the stranger gestured towards the office. "There are injured people in there. They need medical attention." He set off again, Youko in tow. The teacher yelled something at them she didn't understand.

She said, “Where are we going?” She wanted to run home as fast as she could. Instead of fleeing down the stairs the stranger headed up. “This way goes to the roof,” she gasped.

“Others will be using the stairs below.”

“But . . .”

“Where we go now, hell follows after. Better to not involve anyone else.”

Then why did you involve me? Youko wanted to scream at him. *What enemy? What are you talking about?* But she did not have the courage to raise her voice against him.

He flung open the door at the top of the stairs and half-dragged her out onto the roof. Behind them came the sound of metal ground against rusty metal. A shadow fell across the doorway. Youko forced her eyes up, taking in tawny wings, a gaping mouth beneath a hooked, venom-stained beak.

A catlike howl burst from the wide maw. Each of the bird’s enormous wings was tipped with five talons.

I know this creature.

She stood, frozen as if bound hand and foot. With each horrid screech the creature’s blood lust poured down upon her.

In my dreams.

An inky dusk stained the overcast skies. Through the heavy pleats of the swirling clouds streamed the roiling red glow of the setting sun.

The great, eagle-like bird had a horn in the center of its forehead. It tossed its head, flapped its wings, buffeting them with a foul-smelling wind. As in her paralyzing nightmares Youko could only stare. The bird lifted its body from its perch, floated upwards, beat its wings once again, tucked in its feathers and plummeted towards her. Its scaly extremities reached out for her, the razor-sharp claws unsheathing from its horny feet.

She had no time to prepare. Her eyes were wide open. Yet she saw nothing. Even when she felt a blow to her shoulders it seemed impossible that the creature’s claws could be tearing into her flesh.

"Hyouki!" The name echoed through the air. A bright red fountain gushed before her eyes.

My blood.

Except that somehow she felt no pain. She shut her eyes. *See no evil*, she told herself. Incomprehensibly, it seemed that death should be more terrifying than this.

"Hold on!"

She was taken by the shoulders and roughly shaken. She came to herself, opened her eyes to see the stranger glaring at her. The concrete wall was hard at her back, her left shoulder dug into the cyclone fencing that enclosed the perimeter of the roof.

"This is not the time to swoon!"

Youko jumped up in alarm. The collision had send her tumbling her clear across the roof. An awful cry of torment arose. Sprawled before the doorway the great bird flapped its wings, fanning about it swirling gusts of wind. Its claws dug deep grooves in the concrete as it flung its head back and forth. It could not free itself. A beast had its jaws locked about the bird's neck, a beast resembling a panther wrapped in crimson fur.

"What . . . what is that?"

"I warned you of the dangers that awaited us."

He pulled her away from the fence. Youko found herself staring at the beast and bird entwined in their death struggle, then back at the stranger.

He said, *"Kaiko."*

The form of a woman rose out of the solid surface on which they stood, like a bather rising from a pool. Only the upper half of her body appeared, a body clothed in downy feathers, arms like graceful wings. She held a sword encased in a magnificent scabbard. The hilt of the sword was inlaid with gold and pearl and studded with jewels.

It struck Youko as little more than a frivolous ornament. The stranger took the sword from the woman and presented it to Youko.

“What . . . ?”

“It is yours. You alone may use it.”

“Me?” Her eyes flashed from the sword to the stranger’s face. “Why me?”

He pressed the weapon into her hands, his face emotionless. “I have no taste for the sword . . . ”

“But you said you would help me!”

“ . . . and no talent with it.”

It was heavier than she would have thought. How in the world was she supposed to defend herself with *this*?

“What makes you think I do?” she shot back.

“Will you die like a lamb led to slaughter?”

“No!”

“Then use the sword.”

Youko was lost in a chaos of thoughts. She didn’t want to die, not here, not like this. But neither did she have any inclination to charge into battle waving this weapon above her head. She possessed neither the strength nor the skill to do anything with it. The voices in her head told her to wield the sword, to not wield the sword, to wield it, to . . .

She chose the third option. She threw it.

The stranger shouted in anger and amazement. “You fool!”

She had aimed at the bird’s head. The sword fell short of the mark, skimming the tip of one wing and falling at its feet.

“Damnation!” Snapping off a series of clicks with his tongue the man called, “Hyouki!”

The panther disentangled itself from astride the bird’s claws. It stooped, fetched the sword in its mouth and trotted back to Youko. It was clearly unhappy about having to abandon its prey.

The stranger took the sword. He said to the creature, “Wait here upon my

command.”

“As you wish,” the creature straightaway replied.

“Patience,” the stranger told it shortly. He turned to the feathered woman.
“Kaiko.”

The woman bowed.

At that moment, the great bird lifted itself free, showering them with gravel and concrete. It gyrated into the air. The panther-beast clambered skyward after it. The woman rose clear of the roof, revealing down-covered human legs and a long tail, and attacked as well.

The stranger said, “*Hankyo. Juusaku.*”

As had the woman, the heads of two fierce beasts appeared from the deck of the roof. One resembled a large dog, the other a baboon. “Juusaku, Hankyo. I leave her to your care.”

“By your command.” They bowed.

The stranger nodded, turned his back to her, strode towards the fence, and vanished.

“Wait!” Youko called after him.

Without asking her yea or nay, the baboon reached out and wrapped her in a tight embrace. The animal ignored her protests, lifted her up, vaulted over the fence and leapt into the air.

Chapter 6

[1-6] The baboon sprang from rooftop to rooftop and from rooftop to telephone pole, hurdling from place to place with great bounding strides, almost as if carried aloft by the wind. This jarring, rampaging form of transport eventually brought them to the outskirts of the city and the ocean shore.

The baboon released Youko atop the breakwater facing the harbor. In the time it took her to take a single breath it disappeared. Glancing up and down the seawall to see where it had gone she saw the stranger winding his way through the thicket of concrete tetrapods. He carried the jeweled sword.

“Are you all right?” he called to her.

Youko nodded. She felt dizzy. This was the baboon’s doing, the result of the stark insanity swirling about her. Her knees gave out. She sat down heavily and began to sob.

The stranger appeared besides her. “This is no place to weep.”

What is going on? she wanted to ask him. She could see that he was in no mood for explanations. She turned her face away from him and clasped her knees with trembling hands.

“I’m scared.”

His reaction was cold and abrupt. “Save such emotions for a later time. They are after us as we speak. We hardly have time to catch our breaths.”

“After us?”

The stranger nodded. “You did not kill *it* when you should have. There is nothing we can do about that now. Hyouki and the others will slow it down, but I fear not enough.”

“You mean that bird? What was that bird?”

“The *kochou*, you mean.”

“What is a kochou?”

The stranger replied with a scornful expression. "It is one of *them*."

The emptiness of the explanation made Youko shrink inside. "And who are you? Why are you helping me?"

"My name is Keiki."

He offered nothing more. Youko sighed to herself. She had clearly heard the others address him as *Taiho* but she was in no mood to press the matter. She only wanted to run away, go home. Her backpack and jacket were at school. She didn't want to go back there, not by herself. And she didn't exactly want to go home in her present condition. She crouched on the breakwater lost in her thoughts.

"Are you ready?" Keiki asked.

"Ready for what?"

"Ready to leave."

"Leave? Where to?"

"*There*."

Again, nowhere, anywhere. Youko couldn't care less. Keiki took her by the arm, again, for the umpteenth time. Why didn't he explain himself? Why did he keep dragging her all over the place?

She said, "Hey, wait just a second."

"You've rested long enough. There is no more time to spare."

"Where is *there*? How long is it going to take?"

"If we leave at once, a day."

"No way!"

"What do you mean by that?"

His tone of voice cowed her. She had been toying with the idea of going with him out of curiosity. But she didn't know him from Adam. And a whole *day*. That was out of the question! What would her parents say when they came home to an empty house? They'd never permitted her to travel anywhere that far by herself.

“I can’t. I just can’t.”

None of this made any sense. Why did he keep threatening her, keep making these impossible demands? She wanted to cry. She knew he would berate her if she did so she hugged her knees, clamped her mouth shut, desperately held back the tears.

A familiar voice echoed around them.

“Taiho.”

Keiki quickly scanned the sky. “The kochou?”

“Yes.”

A shiver ran down Youko’s spine. The monster bird was coming. Keiki said to her, “I need your help.” He pulled her to her feet, placed the sword in her hands. “If you love life at all then use this.”

“I keep telling you, I don’t know how!”

“No one else can.”

“That doesn’t change anything!”

“I shall grant you a *Hinman*.” He called out, “*Jouyuu*.”

At his command a man’s head rose out of the rocky surface, an ashen countenance with sunken, red-rimmed eyes. Higher, and it became clear that he had no body below the neck except for dangling, jellyfish-like appendages.

Youko gasped. “What is it?”

The thing slipped free of the ground, turned, and flung itself at her. She tried to run. Keiki caught and held her. The creature clung to her neck, cold and soft, and then oozed down her back. She screamed, “Get it off me!” She flailed uselessly with her hands. “Stop it, stop it!”

Keiki held her still. “You are being unreasonable. Calm yourself.”

She wanted to retch. Tendrils like cold strands of pasta snaked around her body from her spine and beneath the flesh of her arms. She felt *it* pressing heavily along the back of her neck. She shrieked in terror. She twisted away from him, pulled herself free, tumbled to the ground, fell to her knees, tore in a panic

at her neck and shoulders, to no avail.

“What is it? What did you do?”

“Jouyuu has taken you as a host.”

“Host?” Youko ran her hands over her body. The loathsome sensation was gone.

“Jouyuu knows the way of the sword. This knowledge will be at your disposal. The kochou will arrive soon. You must kill it, and not only it, if you are to escape.”

“Not only it?” So there were more coming after her, the same as in the red dawn of her dreams. “I . . . can’t. That Jouyuu or Hinman or whatever it is, where did it go?”

Keiki didn’t answer. He stared up at the sky. “They’re coming.”

Chapter 7

[1-7] In the moment Youko looked to see for herself, behind her, she heard that strange cry. The sword was thrust into her hand. It didn't register at first. She turned towards the cry and saw the great wingspan of the bird as it circled and fell towards them.

She shouted in fear, realizing at once that there was no place to run. The bird was descending faster than she could flee. The sword was useless. She had no idea what to do with it. Confront the beast with it? An absurd thought. There was no way she could protect herself.

The bird's fat-clawed appendages filled her vision. She wanted to shut her eyes but couldn't.

A shock of white light flashed in front of her, followed by a violent, hard sound like two stones crashing together. A heavy talon, gleaming like the blade of an axe, stopped right before her face. She had checked its motion with the sword, half-drawn from its scabbard, held out in front of her and braced with both hands.

She had no time to ask herself how she had done it.

As if of its own accord, her hand drew out the rest of the blade. In the same motion she swung at the bird's feet. A warm spray of bright red blood showered down on her.

In dumb surprise she could only think, *I am not doing this*. Her hands and feet reacted of their own accord, hacking at the limbs of the kochou as it wheeled above them in confusion.

More blood rained down, drenching her. The warm liquid ran down her face and neck, soaked under the collar of her shirt. She shuddered with revulsion. She—her legs, rather—retreated, dodging the eruptions.

The monster climbed into the sky, righted itself and plunged towards her. She slashed at the wings. With every move she felt the cold tendrils rippling through her.

It's that thing, Jouyuu.

Its wings shredded, the bird shrieked and crashed into the ground. In a glance Youko took in the scene. Jouyuu was doing this, she knew, was jerking her arms and legs around like a marionette's.

The giant bird writhed in agony, pounded its wings against the ground and clawed towards her. Without a moment's hesitation she attacked. Dodging its assaults she hacked away at the body. She soon was covered in bloody gore. All that registered were the loathsome repercussions in her hands as each blow parted flesh and bone.

She groaned in disgust but couldn't stop herself. She ignored the spewing blood and drove the sword deep into the bird's wing, then yanked it out, severing a good part of the wing. She turned on her heels, face to face with the animal's screeching, frothing head.

"Please, stop!"

The great bird flapped its wounded wing but was unable to lift its body off the ground. Youko ducked around the beating wing and stabbed at the bird's torso. She shut her eyes to what she was doing but felt the soft resistance in her arms as the blade sank through fat and tissue. She pulled it free, spun, and swung at the bird's neck.

The animal's spine stopped the sword's forward motion. She pulled the sword free, splattering herself with flesh and fluid, swung again and severed the head cleanly from the body.

Only after she had wiped the sword clean with the bird's still quivering feathers did the control of her own body fully return to her.

She wailed in anguish and threw the sword as far from her as she could.

Youko leaned over the edge of the breakwater and vomited. Sobbing, she slid down between the concrete arms of the tetrapod and splashed into the sea. It was the middle of February. The water was cold enough to cut her in two. But her only desire was to wash the bloody filth from her face.

By the time she had returned to her senses she was shivering so badly she could do little more than crawl up the embankment to the breakwater. Back on

solid ground she burst into tears. She wept with fear and revulsion, wept until her voice was hoarse, until there were no tears left inside to come out.

“Are you all right?” Keiki asked.

“Am I what?”

There was no color in the man’s expression. He said, “That was not the only one. More are coming.”

“And?” Her body was numb. His warning stirred in her nothing. Looking up at his face she now felt no fear of him at all.

“They are strong, they are relentless. If I am to protect you, you must come with me.”

“Forget it.”

“You are being foolish.”

“I want to go home.”

“Your home is not safe.”

“I don’t care. I’m cold. I’m going home. Those monsters, they’re all yours. You can have them.” Youko glared at him. “And take this Jouyuu thing out of me!”

“You will still need him.”

“I don’t. I’m going home.”

“You stupid woman!” He exploded in a rage that made Youko’s eyes go wide with surprise. “Do you welcome death? I do not understand. If you do not want to die then you must come with me!”

“Shut up!” Youko screamed at him. “Shut the hell up!” Not once in her entire life had she ever said anything like that to another person. A strange sense of exhilaration stirred in her chest. “I’m doing what I want and I don’t want *any* part of this. I’m going home.”

“You are not listening to what I am saying.”

“I’m going home.” She swatted away the sword offered to her. “I don’t take orders from you.”

“You do not understand the danger!”

Youko answered with a thin smile. “Well, if it’s fine with me, then what’s it to you?”

He said in a low growl, “It is *everything* to me.”

He nodded as she passed. Before she could react two white arms had reached around and had taken hold of her.

“What are you doing?”

She strained to glance back over her shoulder. It was the winged woman who had first borne the sword to her. She pinned Youko’s arms, forced the sword into her embrace.

“Let me go!”

Keiki said, “You are my lord.”

“I am your what?”

“You are my lord. Under any other circumstances, I would obey whatever command you gave me. You must forgive me. Once your safety has been secured then any explanation you desire I will provide. If you wish to return home, that too I will endeavor to accomplish.”

“When in the world did I become your lord?”

“There is no time for that,” he answered with a cold look. “I would gladly see one such as you abdicate, but that is not my decision to make. I cannot abandon you. The best I can do is keep more innocents from being drawn in. If force is what is required then force I will employ. Kaiko, take her.”

“Let me go!”

“Hankyo,” Keiki beckoned. The copper-haired beast emerged from the shadows. “We must get away from here. This place is thick with the scent of blood.”

Next appeared the enormous panther called Hyouki. Still pinning Youko’s arms the woman climbed astride the panther-beast and set Youko onto its back in front of her. Keiki in turn mounted Hankyo.

Youko pleaded with him. “Please, I’m not kidding. Take me home! Take this thing out of me!”

“He is of no bother to you, is he? Now that he has fully possessed you, you should not feel his presence again.”

“I don’t care if I can feel it or not! Get rid of it!”

Keiki addressed himself to the Jouyuu. “Do not reveal yourself. Be as if you were not there.”

There was no reply.

Keiki nodded. Youko barely had time to grip the woman’s arms to steady herself as the beast rose on its haunches and leapt upwards. “Stop!” she shouted.

The panther-beast did not heed her. It climbed effortlessly into the sky, doggy-paddling through the air as it slowly gathered speed. Were it not for the ground falling away beneath them she could have believed they were not moving at all.

As if in a dream the beast galloped farther and farther away from the earth, revealing one last glimpse of the city below, wrapped in the falling dusk.

Chapter 8

[1-8] The heavens were suffused with a cold, starry light. Across the surface of the earth a constellation of artificial stars traced the outlines of the city.

The panther-beast soared over the bay as if swimming through the air. The speed of their departure stole her breath away, yet strangely she did not feel the fierce and expected wind and so had little sense of their velocity. She knew how fast they must be going only from the rate at which the cityscape disappeared behind her.

No matter how much she pleaded no one answered her.

With no way to judge the rate of their progress, her fear in this regard subsided, and instead shifted to the uncertain nature of their destination.

The panther-beast turned towards the open sea. She could no longer see Keiki astride his flying creature. He had promised this was to be a long journey.

Along with her exhaustion, a profound sense of indifference overcame her. She gave up, ceased her protests. And now that she thought about it, as she shifted her limbs about, she was not uncomfortable. The woman's arms were warm around her waist.

Youko hesitated, then asked, "Are they still after us?" She twisted around to look at the woman.

She said, "They are legion." Yet her voice was gentle and somehow reassuring.

"Who are you?"

"We are servants of the Taiho. Now face yourself forward. He would not be pleased if I dropped you."

Youko reluctantly straightened. All she could see was the dark sky and the dark ocean, the faint light of the stars, the faint white light of the waves. A high, winter moon. Nothing else.

"Keep hold of the sword. Under no circumstances should you let it out of your possession."

The reminder struck within Youko a chord of fear. It could only mean that more gruesome battles faced them.

“The enemy?”

“They pursue us. But Hyouki is fast. Do not worry.”

“Then . . .”

“Make sure you do not lose the scabbard either.”

“The scabbard?”

“The sword and scabbard are a pair and must be kept together. The jewel attached to the scabbard is there for your protection.”

Youko looked down at the sword in her arms. A blue-green sphere the size of a ping pong ball was attached to the ends of the ornamental cord wound around the scabbard.

“These?”

“Yes. Hold them and see for yourself. It should be cool enough to tell.”

Youko grasped the spheres. The sensation gradually seeped into her palms. “They’re warm.”

“You will find them of use whenever you are wounded or sick or fatigued. The sword and scabbard are valuable treasures. Always know where they are.”

Youko nodded. She was thinking of her next question when their speed suddenly slowed.

The white moon shone in a halo on the dark water. The intensity of the reflection weaving across the waves grew as they descended, almost as if the moonlight itself was exciting the whitecaps into a lively froth. Closer and she could see the surface of the ocean churning into a waterspout.

Youko realized that the panther-beast was about to dive directly into the ring of light at the center of the sparkling whirlpool.

“I can’t swim!”

“Do not worry.” The woman tightened her embrace around Youko’s waist.

“But . . .”

She had no time to raise any further objections.

They plunged into the whirlpool. Youko shut her eyes, prepared herself for the hard collision with the water. She felt instead . . . almost nothing. Not the spray of the surging waves, not the cold touch of the sea. Nothing but an immersion in the silver light, light that leaked through the corners of her eyes.

Something like a thin gauze brushed against her face. She opened her eyes. They were ensconced, it seemed, within a tunnel of light. There was no darkness, no wind, only an encompassing glow that enveloped them from head to toe, a halo of moonlight cutting beneath the black waves.

“What is this?” Youko wondered aloud.

There was a ring of light below the beast’s feet, as there was above its head. She couldn’t tell whether the light streamed from head to foot or the other way around. In either case, they would cross it’s length shortly.

No sooner had they leapt into the circle of light but she again felt the gossamer veil brush her face. With a bound they shot above the water. The sounds of the ocean returned. Raising her eyes she again took in the wide, dull expanse of the sea. They slipped from the halo of the moon. How far from the surface she couldn’t tell. All she could see were the tops of the waves bathed in the moonlight.

The surface churned into a radiant foam, as if driven by a fierce wind. The waves rose up around them in concentric rings, broke into whitecaps. Astride the panther-beast Youko could feel nothing of the hurricane, only the draft of a slight crosswind. The clouds roiled above. The beast pushed harder and climbed into the sky. They were soon too high to see even the moonlight weaving across the storm-tossed seas.

“Hyouki!” the woman shouted.

The alarm in her voice made Youko look back at her. Following the woman’s gaze she saw a multitude of black shadows leaping out of the moon’s bright halo.

The only light was from the moon and its reflection upon the sea. They raced

into the darkness of the gathering clouds.

Pitch black.

No heaven and no earth. And then only the deep amber glow that remained of the moon, a faint light that danced and shifted like the flames of a raging fire. She saw the countless shadows and knew they were coming for her. The creatures raced from the blood-red moon, the apes and rats and birds, the red-haired beasts and black-haired beasts and blue-haired beasts.

Youko stared in amazement at the vision appearing before her eyes. She'd seen it before. She knew it. "Faster!" she screamed. "They'll catch us!"

The woman shook her. "Calm yourself. That is what we are doing."

"No!"

The woman pushed Youko's body flat against the back of the panther-beast. "Hold on," she said.

"What are you . . . ?"

"I shall attempt to impede their progress. Tighten your grip. Do not let go of the sword."

Assured that Youko had understood her instructions, she took her arm from around Youko's waist and vaulted rearward, kicking up and away from them. For a moment Youko caught a glimpse of the golden stripes running down her back before she was swallowed up by the night.

Youko could see nothing but the engulfing gloom. They were buffeted by gust of wind. She plastered herself against the beast's back.

"H-Hyouki-san?" she said.

"What is it?"

"Are we going to get away?"

"That is hard to tell," he answered inscrutably. He shouted, "Watch out! Above you!"

Youko looked up and caught a faint flash of red.

"A *gouyu*." Hyouki turned without warning. Something slammed into its side

and fell away.

“What was it?”

Hyouki continued on, dodging from side to side. Suddenly it slowed. “Draw your sword. It is an ambush. They have cut us off.”

“What do you mean, an ambush?”

Peering ahead into the darkness she watched as another crimson light blossomed, watched as the hoard came leaping towards them out of the shadows.

“Oh damn.”

The thought of raising the sword again filled her with loathing. At the same time the cold tendrils touched the insides of her legs. With a force that made her joints crack her knees clamped to the beast’s sides. The icy worm crawled up her spine. Her body peeled unwittingly from Hyouki’s back. Her hands released their grip, her arms prepared for battle. She drew the sword, tucked the scabbard into the belt of her skirt.

“Stop it!”

She extended the sword with her right hand, with her left she grasped the beast’s mane.

“Please!”

They closed on each other, tore through each other like storms colliding. Hyouki plunged into the midst of the hoard and Youko’s sword sliced into the onrushing flood. She could do nothing but scream and close her eyes. It wasn’t just the killing of living things. She couldn’t even bear the sight of a frog autopsy in biology class. Her existence should not demand so much slaughter.

The sword halted its motion. Hyouki called out, “Open your eyes! Jouyuu cannot defend you otherwise!”

“No!”

The beast reared, threw back its head, doubled back. Youko kept her eyes tightly shut. She was not going to cause any more death. If shutting her eyes stilled the sword, then that is what she would do.

Hyouki swerved abruptly to the left. They struck hard, a collision like hitting a wall. She heard the yelp of a wounded dog. She opened her eyes and saw only black. Before she could grasp what had happened Hyouki keeled over.

Her legs lost their grip. She pitched into the air.

Before her startled eyes charged a beast like a wild boar. In her right arm she felt the impact as steel severed muscle and bone, heard the roar of the eviscerated monster, her own screams.

And then nothing. No sight, no sound, no taste or touch or thought. Only her falling and falling through the endless dark.

Part II

Chapter 9

[2-1] Youko awoke to the sound of crashing waves. She felt the spray of the ocean on her face. She opened her eyes, raised her head. She had fallen onto a sandy beach not far from the water's edge. A big wave broke against the shore. The water swept along the strand, bathing her feet.

Unexpectedly, the water was not cold. Youko lay there on the sand and let the waves wash against her. The rich smell of the ocean surrounded her, a smell something like the smell of blood. The sea was in her veins. That is why, when she closed her ears, she heard the distant roar of the ocean.

The next surge flooded to her knees. The sand churned up in the tide tickled her skin.

That deep scent of the sea.

She looked at her feet. The water lapping against her body was stained red. She glanced at the gray surf, up at the wide, gray sky. She looked down again. The water was indeed red.

She searched for its source. "Ah," she said.

Her legs. The crimson streams streaked down her skin. She bolted to her feet. Her hands and feet were stained red. Her navy blue school *seifuku* uniform had turned a dark maroon.

Blood.

She moaned. Her whole body was soaked with blood. Her hands were black and sticky with gore, as were her face and hair. She cried out and splashed down in the midst of the breaking waves. The water rushed in muddy gray, receded crimson. She scooped up water in her hands. It bled between her fingers. As much as she scrubbed at her hands she could not uncover the natural tone of her skin. The surf rose to her waist. A pool of color spread out around her, scarlet beneath the charcoal sky.

Youko again raised her hands to her face. In front of her eyes her fingernails lengthened, grew to sharp claws half again as long as her fingers themselves.

“What . . . ?”

She turned her hands over. There were a multitude of small cracks or fissures running along the skin. A fragment of her skin peeled away, wafted away in the wind, tumbled into the water. Beneath the skin was a matt of short-haired red fur.

“No, I don’t believe this.”

She brushed her hand against her arm. More skin flaked away revealing red fur. Every time she moved she shed flesh. A wave swirled against her. Her uniform shredded as if eaten away by acid. Water washed the fur and the ocean ran red.

The claws on her hands, the fur growing on her body, she was turning into one of the beasts.

“No, no, no,” she sobbed. Her uniform fell to pieces. Her arms wrenched about like the forelegs of a cat or dog. *The blood, the blood of those creatures, it’s made me into one of them.* It was not possible. She screamed, “NO!”

In her own ears she heard no recognizable sound, only the roar of the crashing waves and the inarticulate howl of a beast.

Youko opened her eyes to a pale blue sky.

Her whole body hurt. The ache in her arms was excruciating. She held up her hands and gasped in relief. Normal. She had normal human hands. No fur, no claws.

She sighed to herself. She wracked her brain, trying to remember what had happened. All in a flash it came back to her. She was about to clamber to her feet but her muscles were so stiff she could barely move. She lay there taking one deep breath after another. Little by little the pain subsided. Some kind of motion returned to her limbs.

She sat up, spilling off herself a blanket of pine needles.

Pine. It certainly looked like pine. She glanced about her and saw a forest of

pine trees. The tops of the trees were snapped off, revealing the white wood underneath. A bough must have fallen from those trees.

Her right hand still gripped the hilt of the sword. She hadn't dropped it after all. She examined the rest of her body and found no serious injuries, nothing except for many minor scratches and bruises. Nothing out of the ordinary. Similarly searching her back, her hands ran across the scabbard tucked into the belt of her uniform.

A light haze drifted across the early morning sky. She heard the distant sound of waves. She wondering aloud, "What kind of dream was that?"

It came back to her, the fierce struggle with the beasts, their blood drenching her.

And the sound of the waves.

She groaned to herself.

She surveyed her surroundings. It was before daybreak. A pine forest crowded the shore. She was alive. She had suffered no life-threatening injuries. That was the sum of it.

It did not seem to her that any enemy was close by. Nothing foreboding lurked in the forest. And no allies either. When they had slipped into the halo of the moon, the moon had hung high in the night sky. It was almost dawn. For that long she had been a castaway. Keiki and the others must have strayed far from their intended course.

When you get lost, she reminded herself in a small voice, *you're supposed to stay right where you are.*

Surely they were looking for her. Keiki promised to protect her. If she started out on her own they'd never find her. She leaned against the stump of a tree and grasped the jewel bound to the scabbard. Little by little, the aches and pains began to dissipate.

How strange. But it really did work. She peered closely at the jewel. It seemed like an ordinary stone, though with the luster of polished, blue-green glass. Maybe it was jade.

Still tightly gripping the stone she sat down and closed her eyes.

She'd intended only to take a quick nap but awoke to a bright morning sky. "It's getting late," she noted.

But where was everybody? Keiki, Kaiko, Hyouki? Why hadn't they come to get her? Finally she said, "Jouyuu-san?"

If he was still inside her he wasn't telling. She could not feel his presence at all. In other words, he wasn't going to show up unless she started waving that sword around.

"Hey, you there?" she asked herself again. "Where's Keiki?"

No answer. Nothing. A big lot of help he'd turned out to be. She raised her head nervously. What if Keiki came looking for her and missed her? She recalled the yelp of pain the instant before she fell. She'd left Hyouki behind, surrounded by the monsters. Had he survived?

The unease pressed down on her head and shoulders. She jumped up, quelling the scream of panic rising from deep inside her.

Looking around she spied a break in the woods to her right. Nothing between here and there struck her as dangerous. She could at least venture that far.

Beyond the forest was a fallow field. The field was strewn with a thicket of shrubs plastered against the discolored earth. Beyond the field a cliff leaned out over a black sea.

Youko approached the edge of the cliff. She came closer and it was like standing at the top of a tall building and looking over the edge. What she saw amazed her.

It was not the sheer height of the cliff . It was the water, black as the night sky, almost blue in its blackness. Even in the light of dawn the sea looked like night. But then, as she followed the face of the cliff down into the water, she realized that the water itself was not black. It was perfectly clear. How deep she could not begin to imagine. The sea must be so vast, so deep, that no light could penetrate its depths.

Then, from deep within the deep, she saw a glittering point of light. At first she

could not make out what it was, but then there were many more of them, the small specks of light spread out against the wide black like grains of sand. Together the light gathered into a faint, background glow.

Like stars.

Vertigo overcame her. She sat down. She knew what it was. She'd seen pictures of stars and nebulae and galaxies. Reaching out below her was the *universe*. Her thoughts suddenly overwhelmed her. She could no longer turn her face from the truth in front of her: *I don't know this place*. This was not the world she knew, not the ocean she knew. She was in a different world altogether.

What in the world . . . "This can't be true," she said aloud.

Where was she? Was this place safe? Dangerous? Where would she go? What would she do? *Why did this have to happen to me?*

"Jouyuu-san." She closed her eyes, raised her voice. "Jouyuu! Please answer me!"

She heard only the roar of the ocean in her ears. Not a whisper from the being that possessed her.

"What am I supposed to do? Isn't somebody going to help me?"

One full night had already passed. Her mother must be worried sick about her. Her father would be furious.

"I want to go home."

Tears tumbled down her cheeks. She choked back a sob. "I want to go home," she said again. She couldn't hold it back. She hugged her knees, buried her face in her arms and wept.

Youko finally lifted her head. She'd cried so hard and so long that she felt slightly feverish. Crying her eyes out had made her feel better, but only a little. She slowly opened her eyes. The ocean stretched out before her like the universe.

"How very strange—"

She felt as if she was gazing *down* on a sky shot through with stars, a starry

night arraigned against the serene blackness, the galaxies turning slowly in the water.

“So strange and yet so beautiful—”

In time Youko calmed down and managed to collect her wits about her. Absentmindedly she gazed down at the stars in the water.

Chapter 10

[2-2] She sat there staring out at the sea until the sun had risen high in the sky. What kind of world was this? Where was she?

They'd passed through the halo of the moon to get here. That alone was hard enough to believe. At any rate, grabbing hold a moonbeam seemed no more possible than catching the light of the setting sun in a bottle.

Then there was Keiki and all those strange creatures. None of them belonged to any species on Earth. They must come from this world. That's the only thing that made sense to her.

What was he thinking, bringing her here? He said it was dangerous. He said he would protect her. Yet here she was. In danger and unprotected. What were they up to? Why did those monsters attack her? It was like she was reliving a nightmare, the same dream she'd been having for the past month.

Nothing had made sense from the very moment she met him. She knew this much: she was lost. He'd shown up out of nowhere and dragged her off to this strange world without a second thought about the circumstances of her life. Not because he hated her, she was sure. But if they'd never met she wouldn't be stuck here and she wouldn't have had to kill all those creatures.

So it wasn't that she missed him. There simply wasn't anybody else she could trust. And he hadn't returned to retrieve her. Perhaps something happened during the battle with the monsters that kept him from coming back for her. Whatever the reason, it only made things worse for her now.

Why must I keep dwelling on this?

Because it wasn't her fault. It was Keiki's fault, his fault the monsters came after her. *The enemy is at the gates*, the voice in the vice-principal's office said. But that didn't mean they were *her* enemies. She had no reason to make them *her* enemies.

And that business about calling her his *lord*. She'd been thinking about that as well. Because she was his lord, his enemies had gone after *her*, not him. She had

to use the sword to defend herself and ended up here.

She wasn't lord of anything.

He'd made the whole thing up. Or he'd made a mistake, a really dumb mistake. He said he'd been searching for her. You'd think when somebody was searching for their emperor or whatnot, they wouldn't screw things up this bad.

"So who are you protecting now?" She grumbled to herself. "This is your mistake, not mine."

The shadows lengthened. Youko got up. Sitting there complaining about Keiki wouldn't solve anything. Glancing to her right and left she couldn't find the gap in the trees she'd come through before. *Whatever*, she told herself, and marched off into the forest. She didn't have her coat but it wasn't that cold here. This must be a warmer climate than where she lived.

The forest looked like it'd been hit by a typhoon, broken branches strewn all about. The forest was not deep. When she emerged she found herself at the edge of a wide marsh.

No, it wasn't a marsh but a rice paddy. Directly in front of her a causeway jutted above the water. She could see the tops of some kind of short green vegetation blown flat against the muddy lake. Beyond the rice paddies, a handful of houses formed a small village. And beyond that were the steep slopes of a mountain.

There were no telephone poles or power lines. No television antennas. The roofs of the houses were made of black tile, the walls of yellow adobe. The village had once been ringed by a line of trees. Most of the trees were toppled over.

Youko pressed her hand to her chest, taking in her surroundings with a great sense of relief. It wasn't the sight of the buildings, or the strange landscape she'd prepared herself for. Rather, this could be any plot of rundown farmland scattered around the back country of Japan.

She spotted the forms of a number of people working some distance away in the rice paddies. She couldn't make out any details, but they didn't look like monsters.

"Oh, wonderful!"

The exclamation rose unconsciously to her lips. She was still recovering from the confusion of seeing that black sea of stars. But, finally, here was something comfortingly familiar. If she ignored the complete lack of telephone poles she could pretend it was an ordinary Japanese village.

She took a deep breath. She decided to call out to them and see what happened. She hated the thought of talking to people she had never seen before. She didn't even know if they spoke the same language. But if she wanted any help she didn't have much choice.

Partly to encourage herself and partly to calm her nerves, she said aloud, "I'll explain my situation and ask if anybody's seen Keiki around."

No one could expect her to do anything more or less.

Youko returned to the causeway she'd seen earlier and made her way toward the people in the fields. As she drew closer, they clearly were not all Japanese. There were brown-haired women and red-haired men. Many reminded her somewhat of Keiki. Their features and stature weren't Caucasian either. Their oddness seemed mostly due to the color of their hair. Take that away and they'd be pretty normal.

Their clothing wasn't that dissimilar from traditional Japanese garb. All the men had their hair grown out and tied back. They were breaking down the causeway with their shovels.

One of the men looked up. He saw Youko and pointed her out to his companions. He shouted something at her, but she couldn't make it out. The eight or so men and women there turned and looked at her. Youko acknowledged them with a slight bow. She couldn't think of what else to do.

A black-haired man in his thirties scrambled up the bank to the causeway. "Where you from?" he asked.

Youko registered the question with a deep sense of relief. They spoke the same language. She almost felt like laughing. She wasn't as bad off as she thought.

"I was over there, by the cliff," she said.

"The cliff? I mean, what's your hometown?"

Tokyo, she started to say, and changed her mind. She'd decided simply to explain her circumstances, but she doubted now that they would find anything she said believable. As she stood there trying to think of what to say, the man pressed again, "You're not from around here, are you? You come from across the ocean, huh?"

It was close enough to the truth. Youko nodded. The man's eyes widened. "Yeah, figures. Like a bolt out of the blue, you know, the way your kind show up like this."

The man grinned at her, as if comprehending something that she did not. He stared, his look approaching a leer, until his gaze fell on the sword she held down at her side. "Hey, what have you got there? Looks important."

"Someone . . . gave it to me."

"Who?"

"His name is Keiki."

The man closed the distance between them. Youko took a step back.

"Looks heavy. Don't worry. I'll take care of it for you."

The look in his eyes did not persuade her. She didn't like the way he talked to her either. She clasped the sword to her chest and shook her head. "It's okay. Where am I? What is this place?"

"This is Hairou. Frankly, missy, don't want to chance you waving a dangerous thing like that around, especially when you don't even know where you are. Hand it over."

Youko retreated again. "I was told not to."

"C'mon, give it up."

The force of his demand made her quail. She didn't possess the courage to tell him no. Reluctantly she held it out to him. He snatched it from her and examined it. "Yeah, fine work, this. The guy you got it from must have been loaded."

The other men and woman gathered around them. Somebody asked, "One of them *kaikyaku*, is she?"

“Yeah. Look at what she was carrying. Worth a fortune.” He went to pull the sword from the scabbard. The hilt did not budge. “So it’s just an expensive toy!” He laughed and tucked the sword into his waistband. He reached out and grabbed Youko by the wrist.

“Ow! Let me go!”

“Can’t do that. Kaikyaku get sent to the governor. That’s orders.” He gave her a shove. “Get going. And don’t try anything.” He raised his voice to his companions as he pushed her along. “Hey, I could use some help, here.”

Youko’s arm hurt. She could not begin to guess this man’s true motives, nor where he was taking her. What she wanted most was to be free of him.

Immediately as the thought entered her mind a cold sensation crept into her hands and feet. She jerked her hand free of his grip. Her arm, quite on its own accord, reached for the sword at the man’s waist and came away with both it and the scabbard. She jumped back from him.

“The bitch! Watch out! She’s got the sword!”

“What? It’s just an ornament. Hey, little girl, calm down and come with us.”

Youko shook her head.

“You want to get dragged the whole way there? Huh? Quit clowning around and get your ass over here.”

“No way.”

More people were gathering around them. The man took a step towards her. Youko pulled the sword from the scabbard.

“What the hell!”

“Don’t come any closer . . . please.”

Everyone around her froze. Youko eyed them and backed way. As soon as she turned and started to run she heard footsteps behind her.

“Don’t follow me!” she shouted, but as soon as she had glanced back to see them coming after her she drew up, raised the sword, her body preparing itself for combat. Her blood roared in her ears.

“Stop it,” she told herself.

She lunged with the sword towards the nearest man charging towards her.

“Jouyuu, stop!”

It was pointless to argue with him. The tip of the sword traced a graceful arc through the air.

“I’m not killing any more people!”

She shut her eyes. At once the movement in her arm stopped. At the same time someone came upon her on horseback, yanked the sword from her hand and knocked her roughly off her feet. Tears welled up in her eyes, more from relief than pain.

“Stupid girl.” They jabbed and kicked and punched her but it was not too much to bear. Someone dragged her to her feet and pinned her arms behind her back. She did not care to resist. She pleaded with herself, with Jouyuu, *do nothing*.

“Let’s take her back to the village. Better take that strange sword to the governor as well.”

Her eyes still tightly shut, Youko could not tell who had spoken.

Chapter 11

[2-3] Youko was marched down a narrow path that wound through the paddies. After a fifteen-minute walk they arrived at a small town surrounded by a high fence. It was the hamlet she had spied earlier, little more than a rough handful of houses. Here, though, set into one wall of the squarish fence was a sturdy-looking gate.

The gate opened inwards, revealing another interior wall^[3] decorated with many pictures drawn in red colors. In front of the wall, for no discernable reason, someone had left behind a wooden chair. Youko was pushed along past the wall and towards the center of the village. When she came around the red wall, an unbroken view of the main street opened up to her.

The scene again roused in her both feelings of familiarity and strangeness. The feelings of familiarity came from its overall resemblance to oriental architecture—the white, plastered walls, black tiled roofs, the distinctive latticework of the arbors. But despite this, she felt no affinity for the place, undoubtedly because of the lack of a human presence.

A number of smaller paths branched out to the right and left of the wide street facing from the gate. She didn't see a single person. The houses were no higher than a single story but were all hidden from the street behind a white fence that reached as high as the eaves. Gaps appeared in the fence at regular intervals, revealing glimpses of houses set back behind small gardens.

The houses were uniform in size, and looked very much the same, despite small differences in their outward appearance. They could have been rolled off an assembly line.

Here and there a window was open, the wooden shutters propped open with bamboo poles. Yet from the street Youko could sense no human presence. Not a single dog. Not a sound.

The main thoroughfare was no more than a hundred yards in length, ending at a plaza. Commanding the plaza was a building tiled with brilliant white stones. Yet the dazzling decoration seemed little more than a facade. The narrow streets

intersecting with the plaza ran no more than thirty yards or so before meeting the surrounding wall of the town and bending out of sight.

On the streets there was no sign of human activity.

Youko glanced about the plaza. Beyond the uniform black-tiled roofs she could see only the high wall of the town. Turning around she could begin to make something of its shape. It was something of a long, narrow and deep box. The confines of the town were suffocatingly narrow, no more than half as wide as her own school. It was like being inside a big well, Youko thought. The town itself was like the rubble buried beneath the water at the bottom of the well.

They brought her to the center of the buildings facing the plaza. The building reminded her of Chinatown in Yokohama. Yet the red-painted pillars the sparkling walls struck her as no less superficial than the rest of the town.

They entered a long, narrow hallway in the center of the building. It was dark and also devoid of people. After pausing to discuss some matter, the men prodded her forward again, and then shoved her into a small room and shut the door.

Her immediate impression of the room was that it was a jail cell.

The floor seemed to be covered with the same tiles as the roofs, though many of the tiles were cracked and broken. The earthen walls were also cracked and stained with soot. A single window high up on the wall, blocked with bars. A single door, its peephole latticed with bars. Looking through the peephole she could see men standing just outside the door.

The room's furniture consisted of a wooden chair, a small table, and a larger platform the size of a single mattress. A thick cloth was attached to the top of the platform. It was obviously intended to be a bed.

She wanted to ask where this place was, what kind of place this was, what was going to happen to her next, and a thousand other questions. But she hadn't the courage to ask the guards. They clearly had no desire to talk to her. So without another word, she lay down on the bed. There was nothing else she could do.

As time passed the human presence within the building became more marked. Outside her cell people came and went. There was a changing of the guards. The

blue leather body armor the two new guards were wearing reminded her of policemen or security guards. She caught her breath, wondering what was about to happen. But the guards only gave Youko a pair of fierce looks and said nothing.

It was almost worse this way. It was better when something—anything—was happening. Several times, she determined to speak to the guards, but could not find the courage to speak.

The hours dragged on. It was enough to make her want to scream. After the sun set, and the cell had sunken into blackness, three women arrived.

The white-haired lady at the head of the three wore the kind of outfit Youko had seen in old historical dramas about China. It was a tremendous relief to finally meet someone, and a woman at that, not one of those grim-faced men.

The old lady said to the two who had accompanied her, “You can leave now.” They deposited the articles they were carrying on the bed, and, bowing deeply, exited the jail cell. After they’d gone, the old lady pulled the table next to the bed. She placed the lamp on the table. The lamp resembled a candlestick of sorts. Next to it she put a bucket of water.

“Well, then, you’d better wash up.”

Youko answered with a nod. Slowly she washed her face and hands and feet. Her filthy, blackened, reddened hands soon regained their normal color.

By this point, Youko began to notice how hard it was to move her limbs. This was no doubt because of Jouyuu. Over and over he had forced her body to do things it was hardly capable of. Now her muscles were torn and stiff.

She washed her hands and feet the best she could. The water soaked into the fine lacerations. She went to comb her hair, undoing the three braids gathered at the back. That was when she became aware of something truly strange.

“What . . . what is this?”

Undone from the braid her hair spilled down like a wave. She stared. She knew she had red hair, a red that faded at the ends, almost as if bleached. But not this! Where did this bizarre color come from?

It was red, a red steeped in blood, a red changed to a deep, dark crimson. To be called a redhead was one thing, but that was not this! She could not think of what to call it, this impossible, freakish hue. A shudder ran through her. It was the same red color as the coat of the creature in her nightmares.

“What’s the matter?” the old lady asked. When Youko indicated her hair, she tilted her head to the side. “Why worry yourself so? There’s nothing strange about it. A tad unusual, perhaps, but pretty enough.”

Youko shook her head, searched in the pocket of her uniform and brought out a small hand mirror. No doubt about it, those scarlet locks were hers alone.

But who was this person peering back at her? For a moment it didn’t make any sense. She timidly lifted her hand and touched her face. So did the stranger in the reflection. It was her, she realized in amazement.

This is not my face!

Even accounting for the effect that her hair might have on her appearance, this was somebody else’s countenance. Its attractiveness was not the problem. The problem was plainly that this face—its sun-bronzed skin, its deep emerald eyes—was the face of a stranger.

Youko cried out in great alarm. “This isn’t me!”

The old lady turned to her with a dubious expression. “What isn’t?”

“This! This is not who I am!”

Chapter 12

[2-4] The old lady took the mirror from Youko's distracted grasp and calmly examined it. "Just a mirror. Looks fine to me." She handed it back to Youko.

Now that Youko thought about it, her voice sounded different, too. She had become a completely different person. Not a beast or a monster, but . . .

"Well, then, so you don't look exactly like you used to."

The laughter in the old lady's voice made Youko look at her. "But why?" she asked. She again peered at herself in the mirror. It gave her a strange sensation, seeing that stranger in place of herself.

"Why, indeed. Not something I'm bound to know about."

With that, she took hold of Youko's hand and with a wetted cloth dabbed at the many small wounds.

When Youko looked more closely at the her inside the mirror, she could begin to tease out the vestiges of herself that seemed familiar. But they were faint.

Youko put down the mirror and resolved not to pick it up again. As long as she didn't look, it wouldn't matter what she looked like. Mirror or not, she couldn't very well ignore her hair, but if she pretended it was dyed she could put up with it. That didn't mean she was resigned to every other aspect of her appearance, but at this point she didn't have the courage to take an unvarnished look at herself.

The old lady said, "Can't claim to know much about it myself, but such things happen, or so I've heard. Sooner or later you'll settle down and get used to it."

She took the bucket off the table. In its place she placed a large bowl. It contained something like mochi rice^[4] immersed in soup.

"Go on, help yourself. There's plenty more to be had."

Youko shook her head. She had no appetite whatsoever.

"You're not going to eat?"

“I don’t want any.”

“Give it a taste and see. Sometimes that’s the only way to know if you’re really hungry or not.”

Youko silently shook her head. The old lady sighed. From an earthenware teapot that resembled a tall water jug she poured a cup of tea.

“You come from over yonder?” She drew up a chair and sat down.

Youko raised her eyes. “Over yonder?”

“Across the sea. You come from across the Kyokai, did you?”

“What’s the Kyokai?”

“The sea at the foot of the cliffs. The sea of emptiness, the sea as black as night.”

So it was called the Kyokai. Youko tucked the word away in her mind.

The old lady put a box with an inkstone on the table and spread out a sheet of paper. She took a writing brush out of the box and held it out to Youko.

“What’s your name?”

Youko pushed aside her mounting confusion, obediently took the brush and wrote down her name: “Youko Nakajima.”

“Oh, yes, a Japanese name.”

Youko asked, “This is China, isn’t it?”

The old lady cocked her head to the side. “This is Kou. Specifically, the Kingdom of Kou.” She picked up another brush and wrote out the characters.

“This is the town of Hairou. Hairou is in Shin, a county of Rokou. Rokou is a prefecture of Fuyou, which is a district in Jun. Jun is a province in the Kingdom of Kou. I am one of the elders of Hairou.”

Her style of writing was only subtly different from the Japanese Youko knew. Even the Chinese characters looked pretty much the same.

“That’s kanji, right?”

“If you mean what I’m writing, then that’s what it is. How old are you?”

“I’m sixteen. So what are the kanji for Kyokai?”

“It’s the Sea (*kai*) of Emptiness (*kyo*). What’s your occupation?”

“I’m a student.”

The old lady paused hearing Youko’s answer. “Well, you can speak, and you do know your letters. So, besides that strange sword of yours what else are you carrying?”

Youko emptied out her pockets: a handkerchief, a comb, a hand mirror, a notebook, and a broken watch. That was it. After a cursory examination, the old lady asked what each one was or meant. She shook her head, sighed again, and deposited everything in the pockets of her dress.

“Um . . . what’s going to happen to me next?”

“Well. That’ll be decided by my superiors.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

They were sure treating her like a criminal, Youko thought. But the old lady shook her head.

“Don’t mean you’ve done a thing wrong. It’s just that all *kaikyaku* got to go see the governor. That’s the way it is. No need for you to go jumping to conclusions.”

“Kaikyaku?”

“Means visitors (*kyaku*) from across the sea (*kai*). People say they come in from the east over the Kyokai. At the eastern edge of the Kyokai there’s a country called Japan. No person has ever seen it for himself but it must be true, what with so many of them ending up here.”

The old lady looked right at Youko, “Sometimes those Japanese people are swallowed up in a *shoku* and wash up right on our shores. Like you. That’s what the *kaikyaku* are.”

“Shoku?”

“It’s written with the same character as *eclipse*. It’s a tempest, a great storm. But it’s different from a storm. It’s there in the blink of an eye and gone in an

instant. Afterwards, that's when the kaikyaku appear."

Then she added with an uneasy laugh, "Most of them are long dead. And even if they're living, they don't last long. But, still, we take them to the governor. There's lot of very smart people up there who'll figure out what to do with you, too."

"Like what?"

"Like what, you ask? Frankly, I wouldn't know. The last time a living kaikyaku came ashore in these parts was back in my grandmother's day, and the word was that he died even before he got taken to the prefecture seat. A lucky girl you are, making it this far and not being drowned along the way."

"But . . ."

"What, child?"

"But exactly where am I?"

"The state of Jun, I told you. Here." The old lady pointed to the list of place names she had written down.

"That's not what I mean!"

She turned and pleaded with the old lady, who looked back at her with wide eyes. "I don't know anything about this Kyokai. I don't know what kingdom the Kingdom of Kou is. I don't know anything about this world! What is going on?"

The old lady had no answer except a troubled sigh.

"Tell me how to get back home."

"Can't be done."

The abrupt answer made Youko wring her hands together. "It can't?"

"No human being can cross the Kyokai. No matter how they get here, there's no going back."

This explanation did not satisfy her in the least. "No going back? That's just stupid."

"It's impossible."

“But . . . I . . .” Tears welled up in her eyes. “But what about my mom and dad? I didn’t go home last night. I missed school today. I have to go to school. Everybody’s going to be worried.”

It was an awkward moment. The old lady averted her gaze. She stood up and began arranging the things on the table. She said, “Probably better you get used to things being the way they are.”

“But coming here wasn’t my idea! I had nothing to do with it!”

“That’s what all kaikyaku say.”

“My whole life is there. I didn’t bring anything with me. Why can’t I go home? I . . .”

No more words came. She burst into loud sobs. The old lady paid her no mind. She left the room. Everything she brought with her she took with her, even the candle, leaving Youko alone in the pitch black cell. The sound of the locking bolts echoed in the dark.

Youko screamed, “I want to go home!”

But it was too hard to carry on in such distress. She curled up on the bed and wept. She finally cried herself to exhaustion.

And slept without dreams.

Chapter 13

[2-5] “**G**et up.”

A loud voice roused Youko from sleep. Her eyelids were heavy from weeping. Hard sunlight stung her eyes. Fatigue and hunger left her drained but she still had no desire to eat.

The men who’d awakened her then bound her—though not too tightly—with a length of rope and led her outside. When they emerged from the building there was a wagon waiting in the plaza, harnessed to a team of two horses.

She was hoisted onto the horse cart. From this vantage point she could see around the plaza. Crowds of people gathered here and there and on the street corners and stared at her.

Where, she wondered, had all these people been hiding? Yesterday the place had looked like the deserted ruins of a town.

They appeared Oriental, though the color of their hair was markedly different. With so many of them together it made for quite the human kaleidoscope. Every person wore a mixed expression of curiosity and hatred. They really did see her as a criminal getting shipped off in a paddy wagon.

In that fleeting moment between when she’d opened her eyes and her brain had truly woken up, she had prayed from the heart to make it all a dream. The dream was shattered by those men dragging her out of the cell.

They hadn’t given her any time to tend to her dress or appearance. Her school uniform was still drenched with the stench of the ocean from when they had plunged into the whirlpool in the sea.

Another man climbed into the wagon next to her. The driver loosened the reins. Sizing up the two of them, Youko could only think about how she was dying for a bath, dying to immerse her body in the steaming water, wash herself with sweet-smelling soap, dress in fresh pajamas, and go to sleep in her own bed. And wake up and eat the food her mother made, go to school, meet her friends, and talk about all the dumb stuff that didn’t matter to anybody.

It occurred to her that she hadn't finished her chemistry homework. A book she'd borrowed from the library was overdue. Her favorite TV show, that she'd been watching forever, was on last night and she'd missed it. She hoped her mother remembered to tape it for her.

Dwelling on it now it was all so pointless. The tears welled up again. Youko hastily hung her head. She wanted to bury her head in her hands, but with her hands bound . . .

Better you get used to things being the way they are.

No, she couldn't accept that. Keiki never said she couldn't go back home. It couldn't go on like this. It couldn't. Not being able to wash or put on clean clothes. Tied up like a criminal and hauled along in the back of this filthy wagon. She knew she was no saint but she didn't deserve to be treated like this!

Glancing back at the gate receding behind them, she hunched her bound arms and wiped her cheek on her shoulder.

The man next to her—she guessed he was in his thirties—clutched a sack to his chest and gazed blankly at the passing scene. “Um,” Youko asked timidly, “where are we going?”

The man looked at her suspiciously. “You talking to me?”

“Um, yes. Where are we going?”

“Where? To the county seat. You're going to see the governor.”

“And after that? Will there be, like, a trial or something?” She couldn't shake that feeling of being branded a criminal.

“Oh, they'll shut you up someplace safe until they figure whether you're a good kaikyaku or a bad kaikyaku.”

The bluntness of the statement made Youko turn her head. “Good kaikyaku or bad kaikyaku?”

“Yeah. If you're a good kaikyaku, you get yourself a guardian and you get to live someplace. If you're a bad kaikyaku it's off to prison or they just execute you.”

Youko reflexively shrank into herself. Cold sweat ran down her back. “Execute .

.. ?”

“When a bad kaikyaku shows up everything goes to hell. If bad things start coming and it’s because of you, off with your head.

“When you say, bad things coming . . . ”

“I mean wars and disasters and hell following after ’em. If you don’t kill ’em quick they’ll wreck the whole kingdom.”

“But how can anybody be sure?”

The man laughed a mean little laugh. “Oh, lock ’em up for a little while and you find out quick enough. You show up and bad stuff starts to happen at the same time, that means you’re a bad seed, no doubt about it.” There was a threatening look in his eyes. “You brought a few disasters along with you, didn’t you?”

“What do you mean . . . ?”

“That shoku that sent you here. You know how many farms got buried in the mudslides? This year’s harvest in Hairou is gonna be a complete bust.”

Youko closed her eyes. *Oh, yes, that*, she thought. That’s why they were treating her this way. To these villagers she was an omen of doom.

The thought of death frightened her to the core. The thought of being killed, even more so. If she died in a foreign place like this, no one would weep for her or miss her. Her parents couldn’t even claim her body.

How did it come to this?

At any rate, she couldn’t believe that this was her fate. The day before yesterday she’d left home just like any other day. “Later,” she’d said to her mother. The day that began like always should have ended like always. Where had everything gone wrong?

She probably shouldn’t have approached those villagers. She should have been more patient and stayed there by the cliffs. She should have stuck it out with those who brought her here—or for that matter, not gone anywhere with them in the first place.

But she didn’t exactly have a whole wide range of choices open to her. Keiki told her she was coming with him whether she liked it or not. Then they were

pursued by those monsters. She'd done what she had to do to protect herself.

It was like she'd been lured into some kind of trap. On that perfectly ordinary morning the snare had already been set. In the hours that followed the noose had closed. By the time she'd noticed that anything was amiss it was too late. There was no way out.

I've got to get out of here.

Youko checked her growing desire to spring into action right then and there. There was no room for failure. If she blew her chance at a clean getaway she could not imagine how they'd make her pay. She had to pick the moment and get herself the hell out of here.

Thoughts and ideas were spinning around like crazy inside her head to a degree she'd never experienced before in her life.

"Um . . . how long will it take to get to the county seat?"

"By wagon, about half a day."

Youko raised her head. The sky was the kind of clean, clear blue left behind by a hurricane. The sun shone directly above. She'd have to make a break for it before the sun set. She had no idea what the county seat would be like, but she didn't doubt that escaping it would be a lot harder than this horse cart.

"What about my things?"

The man looked suspiciously at Youko. "Everything a kaikyaku brings gets turned in. Them's the rules."

"The sword, too?"

The man again flashed her a distrusting look. She took it as a warning. "What you asking for?"

"Because it's important to me."

She lightly clasped her hands behind her back. "The man who caught me, he wanted it real bad. It's such a relief to know it didn't get stolen."

The man sniffed. "Useless crap. We'll hand it over like we're supposed to."

"Yeah, it's just an ornament but it's got to be worth a lot of money."

The man looked into her face, then opened the cloth sack on his knees. The jeweled sword buried within gleamed and sparkled.

“This is an ornament?”

“That’s right.”

Being this close to the sword made her feel that much better. But Youko focused instead on the man. He put his hand on the hilt. *Go ahead*, she urged him, *try and pull it out*. That man back in the field, he hadn’t been able to. Keiki said that only she could wield the sword. Perhaps it was true that no one else could. She wanted to be sure.

He put all his effort into it. The hilt didn’t budge from the scabbard even a fraction of an inch.

“Please. Give it back to me.”

He laughed to scorn at Youko’s request. “Like I told you, it gets turned over to the authorities. Besides, it won’t do you much good, what with your head chopped off. No matter how much you want to look, you can’t see much with your eyes shut.”

Youko bit her lip. If not for these ropes, the sword would be hers. Perhaps Jouyuu could help her out, she thought. But as much as she tried the cords would not give. Not even Jouyuu could give her supernatural powers.

Glancing about for some way to cut the rope and get hold of the sword, a flash of gold in the passing terrain caught her eye.

The horse cart turned onto a mountain road. There amongst the rows of trees neatly arrayed in the dark forest she recognized a familiar color. She opened her eyes wider. At the same time Jouyuu sent his presence crawling across her skin.

There was a person in the forest. A person with long golden hair, a pale face, wearing a robe that resembled a long kimono.

Keiki.

As Youko whispered his name, a voice she knew that was not her own echoed inside her head.

Taiho.

Chapter 14

[2-6] Youko shouted, “Stop!” She leaned forward. “Keiki! Help me!”

“What the . . . !” The man next to her grabbed her shoulders and shoved her down.

Youko whirled around. “Stop the wagon! There’s somebody I know out there!”

“There’s nobody you know here.”

“He was just there! It’s Keiki! Please stop!”

The horses slowed their gait.

The golden light was already in the distance. But she saw enough to know that there was definitely somebody there. Next to him was another person. That person was wearing a dark cloak over his head like the grim reaper. A number of beasts were gathered around him.

“Keiki!”

As she turned and called out, the man yanked back on Youko’s shoulders. She fell hard on her behind. When she raised her head again the golden light was gone. She could see the place where it had been, but the people there had vanished.

“Keiki!”

“Enough already!” the man said, roughly shaking her. “There’s nobody there! Quit trying to fool with us!”

“He was there!”

“Shut yer mouth!”

Youko cringed. The horse cart continued on its way. Youko cast a resigned glance back behind her. Of course, there was nobody there.

Why?

The voice she had heard, in the instant she believed she had seen Keiki, it had surely been Jouyuu’s. So it must have been Keiki. She had seen his fellow

creatures as well. So they must be okay.

But then why didn't he help me?

Wracking her thoughts in confusion, she let her gaze wander. But she couldn't see that golden glow anywhere.

At that moment from within the forest came a cry. Youko stared at where the sound was coming from. So did the man next to her. It was the cry of a baby, the spasmodic wailing of a child.

The driver had up to that point said nothing, only driven the wagon forward. He shot the two of them a look and loosened the reins. The horses quickened their pace.

"Hey . . ." His companion pointed off in the direction of the crying. "But it's a baby."

"Don't care. You hear a baby crying up here in the mountains, that's a good reason to keep your distance."

"But, still . . ."

The baby began wailing like it was being scalded, a pressing, urgent cry that no human could bear to ignore. The man continued to search for the source of the sound, leaning out over the side of the wagon. The driver snapped, "Pay it no mind. There's man-eating *youma* in these mountains that'll howl like that."

Youko felt herself tense up at the mention of the word. Youma. *Demons*.

The man frowned, looking at the woods and then at the driver. With a hard expression on his face, the driver snapped the reins again. The wagon bounced and swayed along the hill road. The forest crowded the trail on both sides, shadowing it in gloom.

For a brief moment Youko believed Keiki was going to save her, but Jouyuu's presence was growing more intense. The tension coursing through her body was growing alarmingly taut. There was no way Jouyuu would get like this if he was simply happy they were about to be rescued.

The baby's keening voice was suddenly much closer and getting closer. Answering it, a cry came from the opposite direction. Then the wailing was all

about them. Circling the wagon, the high-pitched voices reverberated down the road.

“Damn it all!” The man’s body went rigid as he scanned the surroundings. The horse cart sped along at an increasingly heedless pace. The wailing rang out again, nearer. Not that of a baby. Not that of a child. Youko shuddered. Her pulse raced. A new sensation permeated her body. This time it was not Jouyuu’s presence, but more like the roar of the ocean.

She shouted, “Untie me!”

The man looked at Youko and shook his head.

“Do you have any way to protect yourself?”

Flustered by the question, he could only shake his head.

“Then untie me. Give me that sword. Please.”

The ring of cries encircling the horse cart was contracting. The horses were at full gallop. The wagon leapt and bounded as if trying to buck off its passengers.

“Hurry up!” Youko screamed. The man made as if to hit her. That’s when it happened. A huge crash. She was catapulted into the air.

She hit the ground hard, vaguely realizing that the cart had tipped over. Catching her breath, choking down a wave of nausea, she looked up to see that the horses and wagon had toppled sideways in a complete wreck.

The man with the cloth sack had been thrown a short distance from her. He sat up shaking his head. He still had the sack clutched tightly to his chest. The baby cries rang from out the edge of the forest.

“Please! Untie me!”

A horse let loose a wrenching scream. Youko turned with panicked eyes. A huge black dog was attacking one of the team. The dog had a hugely overdeveloped jaw. When it opened its mouth it looked like its head was splitting in two. Its muzzle was white. A second later it was crimson. The man shrieked.

“Untie me and give me that sword!”

He was deaf to her pleas. Trembling, he clambered to his feet. Clutching the

sack, free hand clawing at the sky, he stumbled down the hill.

Four black beasts sprang from the woods, bounding through the air after him. Man and beasts became one. Then the beasts alighted on the ground, leaving the frozen form of the man behind.

No, he wasn't petrified with fear. He was missing an arm. And his head. A moment later the body toppled over. A fountain of blood sprayed forth, painting the ground with a rainfall of red. Behind Youko, a horse screamed, a high-pitched neigh.

Youko took cover behind the wagon. Her shoulder touched something, making her start and twist around. It was the driver. He grabbed Youko's bound hands. She saw he was holding a small knife.

"Don't run," he said. "If we go now, we can slip by the bastards."

He undid the cords binding Youko's hands and started down the hill, marching her in front him. One horde of beasts was gathered around the horse at the crest of the hill. At the bottom of the hill another crowded around the fallen man, forming a small black mound over the body. His only recognizable feature, his head, lay a few feet away.

Youko shrank back from this scene of sudden slaughter. It was happening to somebody else, not to her. But her now unfettered body was preparing for battle. She scooped up some nearby stones and picked one out.

What am I supposed to do with these pebbles?

She straightened, faced the bottom of the hill. She could see the man's leg jerking in gory syncopation to sound of frenzied feeding coming from the furry swarm. She counted the pelts. Six altogether.

Youko approached the pack. The baby-like mewling had ceased. The air was filled with the sound of crunching bone and muscle. One of the dogs suddenly raised its head, its muzzle stained with blood. As if called to one by one each of the animals raised its head in succession.

Now what?

She charged forward at a small run. The first dog came at her. She hit it

squarely in the nose with a stone. Not hard enough to knock it down, but enough to make it hesitate in its stride.

This isn't going to work.

The pack drew back, exposing the form of what had not yet ceased to be recognizable as the body of a man.

I'm going to die here.

She'd be devoured like him. Their jaws and fangs would tear her to pieces, into lumps of meat, and they'd wolf her down.

Even as she was assaulted by such hopeless thoughts, Youko drove the dogs back with the stones and set off at a run. Once Jouyuu had been roused to action there was no stopping him. The best she could do was stay out of his way and pray that the end would be quick and painless.

She ran, sharp shocks of pain radiating down her legs and arms and back.

Looking back over her shoulder for help she saw the driver running towards the forest in the opposite direction, madly flailing about with the knife. Just as he plunged into the undergrowth he was dragged down into the shadow of the trees.

She asked herself why he had headed off like that and immediately understood that he had intended to use her as a decoy. While the dogs were busy attacking her he'd slip away into the woods. It hadn't turned out the way he'd planned. It hadn't occurred to him that they'd go after him instead.

She was running out of stones. She was three paces from the dead man's corpse.

A beast came at her from the right. She smacked it in the snout with her free hand. Another nipped at her ankles, rose up and almost bowled her over. She skipped, stumbled, was hit again hard in the back, lurched forward and plowed head-on into the dead man's body.

Oh, gross.

She didn't scream. She was too numb by now. She felt only a mild repulsion. She righted herself, turned in a crouch, braced herself. She didn't think it'd do

much good to try and stare these monsters down, but, surprisingly, they lowered their heads and held their distance. Still, she couldn't keep this up forever.

Youko worked her right hand under the corpse, searching amongst the mangled flesh. Fresh in her mind's eye was the fact that he had been alive one moment, dead the next. She was out of time. Once the pack made their decision, it'd be all over.

She felt something hard at her fingertips. The hilt of the sword practically jumped into her hand. An inarticulate thrill shot through her.

She seized her lifeline. But when she tried to extract the scabbard, halfway out it got stuck on something. She was told to never separate the sword from its scabbard. She hesitated, and she didn't have time to hesitate. She slipped the sword out of the scabbard. With the tip of the blade she cut the cord holding the jewel and clasped it in the palm of her hand.

The dogs made their move. The first one charged into her field of vision. Her right arm moved, the sword flashed.

"AYAAAA!!" An inarticulate cry tore from her throat.

The dogs came at her from the left, from the right. She cut them down, opened up a gap in the throng, plunged through and ran. They charged after her again. She slashed and retreated, and then with all the energy left in her body fled the scene.

Chapter 15

[2-7] Youko sat down against the fat trunk of a tree.

Halfway down the hill she'd cut off the path into the mountains. Here was where her legs finally gave out.

She raised her sleeve to wipe away the sweat on her brow. The fabric of her *seifuku* uniform was heavy with blood. She grimaced, peeled off her jacket and used it to wipe down the sword. She held the blade up in front of her eyes.

She recalled reading in her history class that you could kill only so many people with a Japanese sword before the blood and gore dulled its effectiveness. Sure that the sword must have been damaged during the melee, she carefully buffed the metal until not a shadow was left on the steel.

"Strange . . ."

Strange that only she could draw the sword. When she'd first taken hold of it, it seemed heavy in her hands. But now, free of the scabbard, it was as light as a feather.

Having restored the glitter to the razor-sharp edge, Youko wrapped the sword in her jacket. She took a minute to organize her thoughts.

She'd left the scabbard behind. Perhaps she should go back and get it. *Never separate the sword from the scabbard*. Or so she was told. But was that because the scabbard itself had special value? Or because of the jewel attached to it?

The T-shirt she wore under her uniform jacket was soaked with sweat. It was getting cold but she couldn't stomach putting on that bloody jacket. Now that she had the time to sit and think about it, her body really hurt. Her arms and legs were covered with wounds.

There were teeth marks through the sleeves of her t-shirt. Blood welled up under the T-shirt spotting the white cloth.

Her skirt was torn, her legs etched with countless lacerations. Most were still oozing blood, but compared to the kind of damage those fangs could do—that

took that man's head off *just like that*—these were pretty minor cuts and bruises.

Again, strange. There was no way she should have come out of it like this. Though now that she thought about it, when they were in the vice-principal's office and the window shattered, everybody around her was hurt while nothing happened to her. And when she'd fallen from Hyouki's back onto the beach, she'd suffered little more than a few bumps and bruises.

It was all so weird, though considering that even her physical appearance had changed, it wasn't any more weird than anything else that had happened to her.

Whatever, she sighed. She took a few more deep breaths. She noticed that her left hand was still clenched into a fist. She uncurled her stiff fingers. The blue-green jewel tumbled out. Closing her hand around it again it was clear that the jewel was alleviating the pain.

She held the jewel tightly and dozed off for a while. When she awoke, all her wounds had clotted and closed.

"This is so strange . . ."

The gnawing pain, once enough to bring tears to her eyes, was gone. She felt only a light fatigue. She was definitely not going to lose the jewel, the one thing in her life she was definitely thankful for. That must be why it was so important to not lose the scabbard.

She removed the kerchief from the collar of her seifuku jacket and with the sword cut from it a thin strip of cloth. Tightly twisting it she threaded the strip of cloth through the holes in the jewel and hung it around her neck.

"Jouyuu," she said, directing her attention inwardly. There was no reply.

"I have a question. Say something."

He did not answer.

"What am I supposed to do now? I mean, where should I go?"

No voice answered her. She knew he was there. She concentrated her thoughts, focused her attention, but she felt no evidence of his presence. She heard something like the faint rustle of leaves, but all she felt was silence.

“Hey, a right or a left would be fine by me!”

Youko continued on in her monologue. “Look, I don’t know the first thing about this place, okay? I’m just asking for a little advice, that’s all. If I go someplace where there’s a lot of people I’ll probably get arrested again, right? And if I get arrested, I’m as good as dead. So I keep on running and make sure I don’t meet anybody, then what? Should I be looking for some magical door that’ll take me back home? Not likely, huh?”

Forget about what she *must* do, she didn’t even have a good idea of what to do next. She wasn’t helping herself just sitting here. But it wasn’t like she had an address to ask directions to.

In the forest, the dusk was falling fast. She didn’t have a flashlight, nothing that could be called a bed. Nothing to eat, nothing to drink. It was too dangerous to go near cities or towns, and wandering around in the wilderness wasn’t exactly safe either.

“All I want to know is what to do next! At the very least could you give me a hint or two?”

As expected, there was no reply.

“What the hell is going on? What happened to Keiki and everybody? That was him back there, wasn’t it? What’d he go and disappear for? Why didn’t he help me? Why?”

Only the rustling of leaves answered her.

“I’m begging you. Can’t you say anything?” The tears welled up. “I want to go home . . .”

She couldn’t say she loved the life she’d been living. But now that she was separated from that life, she missed it so badly it hurt. She’d do anything to be back home again. If she could go home she’d never leave again.

“I wanna go home.”

As she sobbed like a child, a thought occurred to her. She’d escaped. She’d escaped from getting shipped off to the governor, from getting eaten by those dogs. She’d come this far and she’d survived. She hugged her knees to her chest.

But was she really any better off?

If it hurts so bad . . .

She shook her head, pushed away the thoughts welling up in her mind. It was too scary to think things like that, thoughts more persuasive than any words. She hugged her knees more tightly.

That was when, out of the blue, she heard the voice. A strange, high-pitched voice, laughing like an old man, laughing at the thoughts she was trying so hard to resist.

“If it hurts so bad, why, it could all be over in an instant.”

Youko scanned her surroundings. Her right hand was at once on the hilt of the sword. The forest was black with the night. There was only enough light to make out the height of the undergrowth and trees.

From the midst of the night came a dim glow, maybe two meters from where Youko was sitting, a thin, blue phosphorescence radiating through the undergrowth.

Gazing at the light Youko gasped and caught her breath. It was a monkey, its fur shining like foxfire. Only its head appeared, parting the tall weeds. He looked at Youko, bared his teeth, and laughed. A screeching laugh that grated at her ears.

“If they’d eaten you up, it would have all been over before you knew it!”

Youko drew the sword from her jacket. “What . . . are you?”

The monkey laughed its screechy laugh again. “I am what I am. Silly little girl, running away, are we? If they’d gobbled you down, there’d be no more of these unpleasant thoughts.”

Youko raised the sword. “Who are you?”

“But I told you, did I not? I am who I am. Your ally. I thought to tell you some nice things for a change.”

“Nice things . . . ?”

She didn’t believe a word he was saying. Jouyuu exhibited no tension or

concern, so she didn't think he was an enemy. But his strange appearance convinced her that he couldn't possibly be a normal living thing.

"There is no going home for you, little girl."

Youko glared at him hard. "Shut up."

"Oh, no, you can't go home. Absolutely, positively not. Because there's absolutely, positively no way for you to do so, is there? Shall I tell you something nice?"

"I don't want to hear it."

"Oh, I shall tell you anyway. You, little girl, you have been royally taken in." The monkey let loose a shriek of laughter.

"T-taken in?" She felt like she'd been doused with cold water.

"You're such a silly girl, now, aren't you? It was a trap right from the start, don't you know."

Her breath stopped in her throat. *A trap*. Whose trap? Keiki's? Keiki's trap? The hand holding the sword began to shake, but she could not find the words to deny what the monkey was saying.

"You knew it all along, didn't you? He brought you *here*, and there is no going back *there*. That's the trap, don't you see?"

The monkey's piercing laugh stabbed at her ears.

"Stop it!"

She swung the sword blindly. The tips of the grass danced with a dull, dry *whish*. For all her reckless effort, the flailing tip of the sword failed to reach the monkey.

"Now, now, not listening to the truth won't change a thing. You go waving that thing around like that and you're going to hurt yourself."

"Stop it!"

"And what a fine piece of work it is, indeed. Why not put it to even better use? Off with her head! A do-it-yourself job!" The monkey threw his head back towards the heavens and shrieked hysterically.

“Shut up!”

She lunged, but the monkey was no longer there just beyond the tip of the sword. He was a little further off, still only his disembodied head visible.

“Now, now, do you really want to kill me? After all, if I wasn’t here you wouldn’t have anyone at all to talk to.”

The raw truth of the statement struck like a blow.

“Have I done you wrong? Have I not most politely deigned to converse with you?”

Youko held her temper, squeezed her eyes shut.

“Oh, yes, poor, poor pitiful you, being hauled off to such a place as this.”

“What should I do . . . ?”

“I can’t see as there’s anything you can do.”

“I don’t want to die.” The mere thought was still too dreadful to contemplate.

“Do whatever strikes your fancy, then. I don’t wish you to die either, little girl.”

“Where should I go?”

“Does it really matter? It really can’t, not when you’re being chased by both people *and* youma.”

Youko buried her face in her hands. The tears welled up.

“That’s right, little girl. Cry while you can. Before you know it there won’t be any tears left.”

The monkey laughed his high, chirpy laugh. The sound of his laughter was farther away. Youko lifted her head. “Wait!”

She didn’t want it to leave her. He might be a complete unknown, but it was better having someone, anyone to talk to than being lost and alone in this place.

By the time she had raised her head to look he was gone. She heard only the screeches of laughter fading into the distance, echoing in the pitch black darkness.

Chapter 16

[2-8] *If it hurts so much, it could be over in an instant.*

The monkey's words rested heavy on her heart. Youko couldn't dismiss them from her mind. Neither could she tear her eyes away from the sword resting on her knees. It lay there, cold and hard, glimmering in the barely perceptible light.

If it hurts so much . . .

She could take the thoughts no further. She shook her head, cast them aside. She couldn't go back and couldn't go forward. She just sat there and stared at the sword.

After a while the blade began to throw off a faint but discernable glow. Youko opened her eyes wider. Slowly, the white outline of the sword emerged in the dark. Youko picked it up and held it out in front of her. The sword cast a brilliant glitter into the night. The flat of the double-edged blade was as wide as her fingers. She concentrated her attention on the curious colors dancing along its length.

An image of some sort was being projected by the sword itself. At first, she thought it was herself, but realized it was not. When she looked closer at the blade she saw it was the silhouette of a person, of somebody working.

She heard a familiar sound. The high, clear sound of water, of a drop striking the surface of calm pool. As she concentrated, the projection from the sword became clearer. The notes sounded and the image drew into focus, like the ripples drawn across the mirrored surface of a pond gently subsiding.

It was a woman, a woman busying about a room. Then Youko grasped what she was looking at. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

"Mom . . ."

The person she was seeing was her mother. The room she was seeing was her own room. The wallpaper with the ivory pattern on a white background, the curtains arrayed with a design of small flowers. The patchwork comforter on her bed. The stuffed dolls on the bookshelf. On her desk, *The Long Winter* by Laura

Ingalls Wilder.

Her mother walked aimlessly around her room, touching things here and there. She picked up a book, flipped through the pages, went to open a drawer, maybe to look inside, but instead sat down on the bed and sighed.

Mom . . .

Her mother looked tired. The gaunt expression on her face made Youko's chest hurt. Her mother really was worried about her. Two days had passed since Youko left. Not once had she even been late for dinner without informing them of her whereabouts beforehand.

One by one her mother picked up the stuffed dolls arranged along the edge of the bed and gently petted them. Then she lay back against the headboard, clasping the doll, and burst into muffled sobs.

Youko couldn't help herself. "Mom!" she called out, as if she were there in the room with her.

As soon as she spoke the scene ended. She suddenly came back to herself. Her eyes refocused. All she saw was the sword. The glittering light was gone, she could see nothing in the blade. The sound of falling water ceased.

"What was that?"

What in the world had she been looking at, she wondered. It looked so real. She again held out the sword in front of her. No matter how much she concentrated, the images did not reappear. Nor did she hear that sound of water.

The sound of a falling drop of water.

She remembered.

It was the sound she'd heard in her dreams. The dreams that had gone on for a month. That same high sound of falling water had accompanied them. Those dreams had become her reality. But what about the vision she'd just seen? The more she thought about it the less she understood. She shook her head. No, she had seen her mother because she wanted so badly to go home.

She looked off in the direction where the monkey had vanished.

You can't go back. It was a trap.

If that was true, all her hopes were in vain. But it wasn't a trap. Surely, even if Keiki wasn't able to help her, that didn't mean he had abandoned her.

No . . . she hadn't clearly seen his face. She could have been mistaken. Maybe it wasn't him at all.

"That must be it."

It *looked* like Keiki, but it wasn't him. People around here had hair in all kinds of colors. She thought it was Keiki because he had blond hair, but she hadn't clearly seen his face. Now that she thought about it, the figure of the person she'd seen was a bit smaller than Keiki.

"Yes, yes, that's what happened."

It wasn't Keiki. Keiki simply wouldn't have deserted her like that. If she could only find Keiki, she was sure she could go home again.

She firmly clenched the hilt of the sword. A series of sensations scurried down her spine.

"Jouyuu?"

Her body roused itself of its own accord. She undid the jacket wound around the sword and cast it aside, prepared herself. "What is it?" she asked, knowing there would be no answer. Her eyes scanned the surroundings. Her pulse raced.

From ahead of her came the dry *whush* of something pushing its way through the underbrush. That *something* was coming her way. The next thing she heard was a howl, as when a dog marks its territory for all within earshot.

Those dogs.

The same dogs that had attacked earlier?

She was at a clear disadvantage fighting in this darkness. She cast a glance behind her. She had to find someplace where there was even a little bit more light. She moved with careful steps, relying on Jouyuu's promptings to guide her. Then took off at a sprint. At the same time, behind her, that big *something* broke free of the undergrowth and rushed after her.

Youko ran through the black forest. Her pursuer should have been fast enough to overtake her but was not quick enough or smart enough. As she dashed from tree to tree, she could hear its heavy mass lurching from side to side, and the occasional thud as it collided hard against a trunk of a tree.

She ran towards the light, bounded out of the forest.

She found herself on a terrace that jutted out from the deforested side of the mountain, bathed in white moonlight. Below her an unbroken view of a range of gently rolling mountains opened up. Cursing that this was not a level and open field she turned and steeled herself. With a great crash the huge shadow charged into the clearing.

It resembled a big bull with a long shaggy coat that rolled in waves as it breathed. It growled at her like a Doberman.

She felt neither panic nor surprise. Her heart raced, her breath burned in her throat, but any fear she might have towards this strange beast faded away. She focused her attention on Jouyuu's whisperings. Her body filled with the roar of the ocean. Yet she couldn't help thinking, *I really hate getting blood all over me.*

She lost track of time. The moon rose high in the sky. The silver sword gleamed in the clean light of the moon.

And then, under the night sky, it was stained black. Three more blows brought the beast to its knees. As she drew close and delivered the *coup de grace*, she saw the glowing red eyes gathering around her in the surrounding dark.

She walked only where there was light. Countless times she beat back the attacking youma.

These creatures could not abide the daylight. So they came at her over and over again throughout the night. Though it was not one long continuous battle, the jewel couldn't stave off her growing fatigue. By the time daylight finally broke over the deserted road, she was jabbing the sword into the ground and using it like a cane. Walking hurt like hell.

The sky grew brighter and the attacks came farther apart. With the first rays of the sun they ceased completely. She wanted to collapse there at the side of the trail, but it'd be dangerous if anybody came across her there. Dragging her

aching limbs she crawled in amongst the trees shouldering the road and found a patch of soft ground cover. She clasped the sword to her chest and fell into a deep sleep.

Part III

Chapter 17

[3-1] Youko awoke towards the evening. She walked about aimlessly during the day and spent the night fighting the youma. She slept amidst the underbrush, ate what edible nuts and berries she could find. Three days went by the same way.

She was so exhausted she had no problem sleeping. Sleep did not stave off the hunger, though. She didn't feel like she was starving to death as long as she held the jewel, but that didn't fill her belly. Her body felt as if it was being gnawed away from the inside out by thousands of little worms.

On the fourth day she gave up on the idea of walking around without any destination or direction. She still had no idea of which way to go. She'd been operating on the expectation that she would eventually run into what she was looking for. Now she had to face the fact that she was simply going around in circles. She wasn't going anywhere.

She had to find Keiki. To do that she had to go where there were people. But once they found out she was a kaikyaku they'd lock her up and she'd be right back where she started.

Youko looked herself over. She really had to get herself some different clothes. If she could only change her appearance that way, people probably couldn't tell at a glance that she was a kaikyaku.

The problem was how to get her hands on different clothes. She had no idea what they used for money here, and besides, she didn't have any cash on her. So she couldn't very well buy anything. Doing things aboveboard, her options were limited. On the other hand, she could threaten people with the sword and take their stuff.

The logic of a wardrobe change dawned upon her pretty quickly. Actually robbing somebody, that was another story. But wandering around in the

mountains for four days had made up her mind for her. She had to stay alive. That didn't mean killing people and robbing their bodies, but she was approaching the limits of what she would hesitate doing.

From the shadow of a large tree Youko looked down at the small village. The village was a collection of humble dwellings crowded together in the center of a narrow valley.

Mustering her courage, she left the shelter of the trees. She approached the nearest house in the village to take a look. Instead of a fence or wall, the house was encompassed by a small garden. The roof covered with black tile. The white mud walls were worn down to the slats.

There was no glass in the windows. The heavy wooden shutters had been left open as well. She drew nearer, scouting out the surroundings. These days she could look a rabid beast right in the face and not even blink. But at that moment, if she hadn't been clenching her mouth closed her teeth would have been chattering.

She snuck a peek in one of the windows. She saw a small dirt floor, a fireplace and table. It looked like an ordinary kitchen. She didn't see anybody there, heard nothing out of the ordinary.

With muffled steps she crept along the wall of the house. Next to the well, she came across what she took to be a wooden door. She pushed on it. It opened, though stubbornly. She held her breath and she peered inside. She had by now concluded it was a house and that nobody was home. Slowly letting out her breath, she went inside.

The room was about ten feet by ten feet. The accommodations were modest, but it smelled like a home. Four walls, some furniture, the various implements of daily life. These alone were enough almost enough to bring her to tears with homesickness.

Upon closer examination, the room otherwise had only a few cupboards. She went to the one door. It opened into a bedroom. There were two beds at opposite ends of the room. A shelf, small table, and a big wooden chest. Apparently these were the only two rooms in the house.

She checked to make sure the window was open, stepped in and closed the

door behind her.

First off, she scanned the shelves. She found nothing there. Next she opened the wooden chest. A variety of cloth and fabrics were packed inside. A second look told her that there was nothing she could wear. A further look around the room revealed nothing else that might contain clothing. With every expectation that in there somewhere must be something to wear, she began pulling everything out one by one.

The wooden chest was almost as big as a large screen TV. It contained a number of smaller boxes that in turn contained a miscellany of things, bed sheets and faded quilts and some children's outfits that were too small for her.

She couldn't believe there were no clothes that fit. As she cast her eyes about the room again, she heard the front door open. Youko literally jumped, as did her heart. She cast a quick glance at the window. It now seemed miles away. It would not be possible for her to move from where she stood without attracting the attention of the person on the other side of the door.

Don't come in here.

Small footsteps padded about the adjoining room. The bedroom door moved. Youko couldn't. She stood there frozen in front of the chest, its contents strewn all about her. Reflexively, she went to grasp the handle of the sword, stopped herself.

She stole because that was what she had to do to stay alive. Yes, it would be easy to intimidate people with the sword, but if intimidation didn't work she'd actually have to use it.

If it hurts so much, it could be over in a moment.

The door opened. A woman started to enter the room, a large-framed woman approaching middle age. Seeing Youko she stopped and started so violently it was like she was having a convulsion.

Youko had no inclination to run away now. She stood there silently. By the by, her nerves settled and she resigned herself to the inevitable. She'd be arrested and herded off to the county seat and likely be executed. It'd all be over. She could finally forget forever about being hungry and tired.

The woman looked down at the clothing and fabric scattered about Youko's feet. She said in a trembling voice, "Got nothing here that's worth being stole."

Youko waited for the woman to scream.

"Was it clothes? Was it because you needed something to wear?"

The plainness of the question left Youko too bewildered to reply. The woman took her silence as a yes. She moved from the doorway into the room. "I keep the clothes over here." She went over to the bed next to Youko, knelt down and drew back the quilt, revealing a drawer underneath. "That box there is for old things I don't need anymore, like for my child that died."

She opened the drawer and took out an outfit. "What kind of clothes do you like, then? Don't have much else besides my own." She looked up at Youko. Youko stared back at her. When she didn't answer, the woman held up a kimono. "Too bad my daughter died so young. These are all pretty plain."

"Why . . ." Youko blurted out. Why didn't this woman sound the alarm? Why didn't she run away?

"Why, you ask?" the woman said, turning to Youko. Youko found herself at a loss for words. The woman laughed, a bit stiffly, and resumed laying out the kimono. "You come from Hairou?"

"I . . . um . . ."

"A big fuss there about a kaikyaku running away."

Youko fell silent. The woman smiled a wry smile. "Lots of hard-headed folk about, that's for sure. Kaikyaku are going to ruin the kingdom, they say. Kaikyaku do bad things right and left, they say. A *shoku* happens and it's all because of the kaikyaku, they say. The things fools say."

She looked Youko over from head to toe. "Where'd that blood on you come from?"

"When I was in the mountains, the youma . . ." She could say nothing more.

"Ah, you were attacked by the youma, eh? Lots of them about, lately. You seem to have come through well enough."

The woman got to her feet. "Go on, sit yourself down. You're a hungry one, I

bet. Had anything to eat? You're looking positively gray."

Youko could only drop her shoulders and shake her head, no.

"Well, then, let's have ourselves a bite. I'll heat up some water and we'll get all that grime off you. We can decide on what to wear after that." The woman cheerfully gathered up her things and started to leave. She glanced back at Youko, who still hadn't moved from where she stood. "Now, what was your name?"

Youko started to answer. No words came out. She sank to her knees, the tears spilling down her cheeks.

"Oh, you poor thing. It's okay, it's okay." The woman spoke in a motherly voice, her warm hand stroking Youko's back. "It must have been very hard for you out there. You'll be okay."

The weight of everything Youko had endured overwhelmed her all at once. The sobs tore at her throat. She curled up on the floor and wept as if the world would end.

Chapter 18

[3-2] “**W**ell, then, why don’t you change into this?”

Standing behind a folding screen, the woman handed Youko a nightdress. “You’ll be staying here tonight? You can wear this for the time being.”

Youko deeply bowed her head in gratitude.

The woman consoled the still teary Youko. She prepared rice gruel sweetened with azuki beans. Then she filled a big tub with hot water and prepared a bath for Youko. Her long, aching hunger satiated, Youko washed in the hot water. Putting on clean nightclothes, she started to feel like a real person again.

“I’m really, really thankful for all you’ve done.” Youko came from around the folding screen the woman had set around the tub and bowed again. “I’m so sorry about everything.”

After all, she had tried to steal from this woman.

When she looked at her directly, she could see that the woman’s eyes were blue. The woman’s blue eyes softened and she laughed.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Let’s leave it at that. Have something warm to eat. Drink this as well. It’ll help you sleep. I’ve made up your bed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Like I said, not a problem. I hope you don’t mind, but I put away that sword of yours. It was making me uncomfortable.”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, nothing you need to keep apologizing for. Now, I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Youko Nakajima.”

“Kaikyaku do have funny names. You can call me Takki.” She handed Youko a teacup.

Youko took it and asked, “How is your name spelled?”

Takki sketched the characters for “achievement” (*tatsu*) and “maidservant” (*ki*) with her finger on the tabletop. “So, Youko, was there someplace you needed to get yourself to?”

Youko shook her head. “No, no place in particular. Takki-san, have you ever heard of a person named Keiki?”

“Keiki? I don’t know anybody by that name. Are you looking for him?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s he from? Is he from Kou?”

“All I know is that he’s from around here.”

Takki said with a patient smile, “Now, that’s hardly enough information. Which kingdom and which province, at the very least. Short of that, why, it’s a needle in a haystack.”

Youko hung her head. “The fact is, I don’t know anything about this place.”

“So it seems.” Takki put down her teacup. “We are one of the Twelve Kingdoms. Specifically, the kingdom of the southeast, called the Kingdom of Kou.”

Youko nodded. “And the sun rises in the east?”

“Of course. And this is the eastern part of Kou, called Goso. There’s some high mountains a ten days’ walk north from here. Over those mountains is the Kingdom of Kei. Hairou is due east of us, by the seashore. Following the main road you can walk there in five days.”

What had been previously completely incomprehensible was bit by bit coming into focus. It slowly was dawning on her that this place was a world unto itself.

“Just how big is Kou?”

Takki tilted her head back and gave it a bit of thought. “How big, she asks me. Well, if you was to walk from the eastern-most border of Kou all the way to the western-most border, I figure it’d take you a good three months.”

“That long?” Youko said, her eyes growing wide. She could not begin to grasp what it meant to walk for that length of time, but she did understand that it was

quite beyond her imagination.

“Yes, that long. It might not be such a big place, but Kou is a kingdom. It’s about the same distance north to south as well. But because it means crossing seas or mountains, going to a neighboring kingdom takes almost four months.”

“And all the Twelve Kingdoms . . . ”

“That’s right.”

Youko closed her eyes. She had somehow pictured in her mind a world like a small garden. How could she find one person in such a vast place? Without a single clue and only the name “Keiki” to go by? Circumnavigating all twelve kingdoms by itself would take four years.

“What kind of person is this Keiki?”

“I don’t really know. Probably like the people here. He’s the person who brought me here.”

“Brought you here?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s a new one on me.” Takki was visibly impressed.

“Is that unusual?”

Takki said with a tight smile, “I don’t have much learning about such things. Don’t know that much about kaikyaku, neither. You hardly ever see them around these parts.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Youko.

“It’s true. In any case, he can’t be any kind of normal person. What you’re talking about, that’s nothing any of us could have done. One of the gods, maybe, or a wizard, or one of the half-demons.”

Youko stared at her. Takki smiled. “Going to that other place, bringing somebody back, it’s not what normal people do. And if it’s not normal people, then it’s got to be a wizard or a youma.”

“I know there are youma, but gods and wizards, too?”

“There certainly are. But they live in the world above, apart from the rest of us.

The gods and the wizards live up there. They hardly ever come down here.”

“Above?”

“Above the sky. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t wizards down here. From the emperor down to the province lords, they’re all up there above the sky.”

When Youko tilted her head quizzically, Takki smiled and explained. “Each of the provinces has a province lord. This is Jun Province. Our province lord is the Marquis of Jun. He rules by will of the emperor. Normal people don’t become province lords neither. They got supernatural powers and never grow old. They’re people from out of this world.”

“I wonder if Keiki is a person like that.”

“Could be.”

Takki again flashed her wry smile. “If it’s wizards we’re talking about, I hear tell that all the people who work at the Imperial Palace, right down to the underlings, are wizards of one sort or the other. The same goes for the big government officials. Regular people can’t go to that place above the sky because that’s where the Imperial Palace is. The emperor is one of the gods. The wizards are chosen by the emperor. Now, there are some folks who manage to pull themselves up there by their own bootstraps, but most of them are recluses, hermit-types. They belong to that other world that we’re not part of. Us and them, going our separate ways like ships in the night.”

Youko took note of everything Takki said. There was no telling what aspect of this information might later prove important.

“There’s said to be a dragon king that rules over the ocean, but that may just be fairytales. If there really was a dragon kingdom, they wouldn’t be normal people either. Besides them, there’s supposedly youma that can change their appearance to look human. That’s what we call the half-demon. Most of them look human, but there are some of them that can disguise themselves so that you can’t tell the difference.

Takki poured some more tea from the earthenware teapot. The tea was cold. “They say that somewhere the youma have a kingdom of their own. I can’t say if it’s true or not. At the end of the day, what it comes down to is, youma and

people, they each come from different worlds.”

Youko nodded. What she was learning was changing the way she saw things. Things were getting a lot more confusing. Like, Keiki probably wasn’t human. If he wasn’t, what was he? Hyouki and Kaiko and those strange beasts must be some species of youma. If they were, then didn’t it stand to reason that Keiki was a half-demon?

“Um . . . have you ever heard of youma called Hyouki or Kaiko or Jouyuu?”

Takki gave her a funny look. “I haven’t heard of any youma like that. Why do you ask?”

“Or Hinman?”

A surprised look came to her face. “Ah, Hinman. The possessor. A youma that possesses warriors on the field of battle. Got no body except for its red eyes. How did you come to know about a creature like that?”

Youko felt herself shiver. Jouyuu was a youma called the Hinman, and even now it possessed her. But admitting that would probably only make Takki think she was weird or something, so she shook her head.

“Or kochou?”

“Kochou.” Takki wrote out the characters for “rice worm” (*ko*) and “carve” (*chou*). “The horned bird. A ferocious animal that eats people. How did you come to know about the kochou?”

“I was attacked by one.”

“Surely not! Where?”

“That other place . . . where I’m from. A kochou attacked us and we had to escape. It appeared out of nowhere, like it was pursuing Keiki and me. We had to come here to keep from getting killed, or that’s what Keiki said.”

Takki said in a low voice, “Did such a thing really happen?”

Youko took a deep breath. “It doesn’t sound right?”

“Not right at all. It’s a serious thing for people around here if youma start showing up even out there in the mountains. Back then, youma didn’t make it a

practice of coming around where people are.”

“Really? Is that true?”

Takki nodded. “But recently, for whatever reason, there’s been a lot more of them. It’s gotten dangerous. After sundown, people don’t dare go out of doors. When one of those mean ones like a kochou appears, what a hullabaloo!”

Takki gave Youko a stern look. “Youma are like any other wild beast. They’re not the kind of creatures to go chasing after one person in particular, let alone to the other side of the sea. Never before heard of such a thing. You know, Youko, it sounds like you might have met up with something quite serious.”

“I guess I did.”

“Well, it’s not that I’m any kind of expert. But recently, what with so many more youma around these parts, it all gives me a bad feeling.”

The tone of Takki’s voice even made Youko feel uneasy. What she was saying made sense. There were youma in the mountains and they attacked people. What in the world had she gotten herself involved in?

Seeing her caught up in her thoughts, Takki said in a cheerful voice, “Well, no point in worrying ourselves sick when it won’t change a thing. So, Youko, do you have someplace to go after this?”

At the question Youko raised her head. She looked at Takki and shook her head. “Other than looking for Keiki, there’s not much else I can do.”

Even if Keiki were a youma, she knew he couldn’t make things any worse for her than they already were.

“That’s going to take some time. Not a thing easily done.”

“Yes,” Youko reluctantly agreed.

“And in the meantime, you’ve got to make a living for yourself, no? Wouldn’t mind you staying here, but my nosy neighbors find you out and they’d no doubt pack you off to the county seat. I could say you were the child of a relative, but they’d probably see through it before long.”

“I don’t want to cause you any more trouble.”

“East of here there’s a town called Kasai. My mother lives there.”

When Youko looked at her, Takki laughed. “She runs an hotel. Don’t worry, she won’t turn you in. She’s my mum, see. I’m sure she’ll give you a job. You willing to work?”

“Yes,” Youko agreed on the spot. It’d be tough looking for Keiki. And it’d be well-nigh impossible if she’d didn’t have a place to live in the meantime. Fighting the youma every night, having nothing to eat, sleeping outdoors—if she could avoid all that she would.

Takki laughed and nodded. “That’s great. You’ll see, it won’t be such a bad job. Everybody who works there is good people. You’ll fit in just fine. How about we set off tomorrow?”

“That’d be okay.”

“Okay it is, then. We’d better get to bed. And tomorrow morning, if you’re not in the mood for traveling, we can stay here for another day if you want.”

Youko bowed her head deeply in gratitude.

Chapter 19

[3-3] Youko's bed felt like a thin mattress laid out on a tatami mat. Youko fell asleep once, then woke up later in the middle of the night.

Her benefactor slept soundly on the other side of the room. Youko sat up and clasped her knees. A clean nightshirt rustled against her clean skin. The shutters were closed. The room was dark. The night was quiet. Sheltered by the heavy roof and thick walls, not even the sounds of small animals disturbed their rest. The air lay calm and still around them. The room felt like a place of sleep.

Youko got out of bed. She retrieved the sword from where it was stashed on the shelf and took it into the kitchen. She'd quickly formed the habit of waking herself from a sound sleep, and until she felt the hilt of the sword in her grasp again she couldn't rest easy. She sat down in a chair, wrapped her arms around the sword—now covered in a new cloth Takki had given her—and took a deep breath.

Takki said it was a three-day trip to Kasai, where Takki's mother ran a hotel. When they got there Youko would have a home of her own in this world. She had no experience working for a living, but her sense of expectation was greater than her anxieties. She wondered what kind of people she would be working with.

She'd sleep in a real building, wake up in the morning, work all day, go to bed at night. Once she started working she probably wouldn't have time to think about anything else. Maybe she wouldn't be able to go home, to her home in that other world, or be able to look for Keiki. But right now she couldn't care less.

Having finally made some sense of this world, she let herself drift off into sleep. As her forehead rested against the shrouded sword, a high, clear note sounded from within the steel.

Youko opened her eyes with a start. A faint light glimmered beneath the fabric. She cautiously undid the layers of cloth. As it had the night before, the sword shone with a ghostly light. Small, dim images flickered across the blade.

Her eyes focused in the dark. The images drew into shape. Before her eyes, like a projection on a screen, was an image of her room. It looked so real she could almost believe if she stretched out her hand she could touch it. But it wasn't real.

The cavernous echo of falling water continued incessantly. As before, the figure she saw in the sword was her mother, pacing aimlessly around Youko's room.

She opened a drawer, moved things around on the shelf as if she were looking for something. About the umpteenth time she opened the bureau drawers, the door opened and there was her father.

He said, and Youko heard his voice clearly. "The bath ready?"

Her mother shot him a quick glance and then resumed searching through the drawer. "Should be. If it's warm enough, go ahead."

"I need a change of clothes."

"If that's all you need, then get it yourself."

There was a caustic edge to her mother's voice. Her father's reply was no less barbed. "Hanging around her room won't do a damned bit of good."

"I'm not just hanging around her room. I have things to do. If you need a change of clothes, you are perfectly capable of getting it yourself."

Her father said, his voice low, "Youko left. Spending your every waking moment camped out in her room won't bring her back!"

I left?

"She didn't *leave*."

"She ran away. She met up with that strange boy at school, didn't she? Then they had their friends outside break the windows. She got mixed up with a gang and hid it from us. Isn't that the best explanation for what happened?"

"She isn't that kind of girl."

"What you mean is, you never noticed. Like her hair. She's been dying it all along, hasn't she?"

“She didn’t.”

“It happens all the time. A kid starts hanging out with the wrong crowd and finally she runs away from home. She’ll come home eventually, when the fun wears off.”

“She wouldn’t do something like that. That’s not the way I raised her.”

They both glared at each other. Her father said, “Every mother says that. That kid that broke into the school. They say his hair wasn’t a natural color. Those gang kids are all like that, and she was one of them, too.”

Dad, it’s not true!

“Stop slandering your own daughter!” Her mother’s words boiled over with resentment. “What do you know? All you know about is your work. But *my* work, everything to do with *our* child, I had to do!”

“That’s the way it is. That’s the father’s role.”

“Father? Who’s being a father?”

“Ritsuko . . .”

“So you go to work, you bring a bunch of money home, and that makes you a father? Our daughter disappears and you didn’t even bother to take the day off! What kind of a father is that? Don’t lecture me about what Youko is or isn’t when you don’t know a thing about her!”

Her father seemed more surprised than angry, “Calm down, you’re being hysterical.”

“Oh, I am calm. I’m as calm as I possibly can be. Just imagining what Youko is going through, what do you expect me to do?”

“You have your responsibilities, too. Calm down, do what you have to do, and then you can worry.”

“And doing your laundry is *my* responsibility, I suppose? Rather than worrying about my child, *that’s* what I should be concerning myself with? All you can think about is yourself!”

Her mother stared at her father. His face flushed with anger but he said

nothing.

“You say she was one of *them*? How can you say that? She’s a good, proper girl. She never talks back or acts up. She never gave me cause to worry. Never. She could talk to me about anything. She’s not the kind of child who would run away from home. Because there wasn’t anything she’d want to run away from!”

Her father turned away, holding his tongue.

“Youko left her backpack at school. And her coat, too. How can that be called running away? Something must have happened. That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“If it did, so what?”

Her mother’s eyes went wide. “So what?”

Her father answered bitterly. “Let’s say she did get caught up in something. Even so, what could you do about it? We informed the police about everything that happened. Running around like chickens with their heads cut off isn’t going to bring her home any faster.”

“Why do you have to say things like that!”

“Because it’s the truth! Handing out flyers and slapping posters on telephone poles—do you really think that’s going to make a difference? Be honest!”

“Stop it.”

“If she didn’t run away, if she got wrapped up in some kind of conspiracy or something, she’d be dead already.”

“Please stop!”

“You see it all the time on the news. Do those kids ever turn up alive? That’s why I say she ran away from home!”

Her mother burst into tears. Her father stared at her, then stomped out of the room.

Dad . . . Mom . . .

Seeing them like this cut her to the core. The scene blurred. She closed her eyes and felt the tears tumble down her cheeks. When she opened her eyes, her

vision was clear. The images had already vanished.

All she could see was the sword, the light gone out of it.

Chapter 20

[3-4] Youko wept uncontrollably. "I didn't die."

Maybe she would be better off dead, but for the time being she was still alive.

"I'm not a runaway."

There must be some way to get back. She missed her home and her parents more than anything.

"That was the first time I ever saw Mom and Dad fight."

Youko rested her forehead against the table. The tears came like rain.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid . . ."

She didn't know what it was she'd seen, but it wasn't necessarily the truth.

She sat up, wiped away the tears, bound the sword in the cloth. Somehow it was like the sword itself was showing her these visions. She couldn't tell whether they were real or not. Her intuition, though, told her the visions were true.

Stiffly Youko got to her feet. She opened the back door and wandered out into the night. The heavens were suffused with stars. She didn't recognize any of the constellations. The fact was, she'd never had any interest in astronomy, so that was probably why she didn't know any of the constellations in the sky.

She sat at the edge of the well. The cool stones and the cool breeze was a small comfort. She held her knees to her chest. Behind her a saw-edged voice stabbed at her ears.

"No, no, no. You can't go home, missy."

She turned slowly. Sitting on sturdy stones that formed the rim of the well was the blue head of the monkey. The monkey rested there on the hewn surface, bodiless, as if severed at the neck, and laughed at her.

"My, my, my, but haven't you given up yet? You can't go home, little girl. You so want to, don't you? Go see your dear mum. But you can plead and plead and it will never happen."

Youko fumbled about for the sword, then realized she'd left it in the house.

"It's what I keep telling you. You're perfectly capable of whacking off your own little head. And if you did, ah, you could rest so easy. All that love and all that longing, it would all go away."

"I'm not giving up. Someday I'll go home, if it's the last thing I do."

The monkey cackled gaily. "So who am I to persuade you otherwise? But I might as well take the opportunity to fill you in on what's coming next."

Youko stood up. "I don't want to hear it."

"Really? You don't want to know? About that woman . . ."

"Takki-san?" Youko turned.

The monkey bared its teeth at her. "You'd better not trust her."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"She's not the good person you think she is, little girl. Good thing she didn't poison you during dinner and be done with it."

"Oh, give me a break."

"Maybe she's scheming to kill you and rob you of everything you've got. Or maybe she'll let you live and sell you into slavery. Either way that's the kind of mischief she's up to. And you want to thank her for it! Oh my, but you're so naive!"

"Quit jerking me around."

"Don't I tell you these things out of love? Don't you understand? You've got no allies here, little girl. No one would shed a tear if you dropped dead. You're such a bother to everybody, don't you know?"

Youko stared hard at the monkey. The monkey answered her with a screech of laughter. "If I told you once, I told you a thousand times: *it can be all over in a moment.*" The monkey howled again, then turned on her with a fierce expression. "Since you won't say a bad word about her, let's just kill her, then."

"What . . . ?"

"Kill her and take the money and run. Since you don't seem to know when to

give up, you'd better do it for your own sake!"

"Shut up about it already!"

Chattering madly with laughter, the monkey disappeared, like chalk being erased off a blackboard. As before, only its grating laughter remained behind, fading away into the distance.

Youko continued to stare at the place the monkey no longer was. What did it have against her? What drove it to give her such grief?

I don't believe it.

Not a single word the little monster had said.

The next morning Youko was shaken awake. She opened her eyes. The large-framed woman was looking at her with a bothered expression. "You awake? Dead to the world, you were. Well, get yourself up and have some breakfast."

"Sorry."

Youko hurriedly got up. From the look on Takki's face, it was obvious she'd been sacked out for a long time.

"No need to apologize. How you doing? Ready to set off? We can always do it tomorrow."

"I'm okay," Youko said, bouncing to her feet. Takki laughed and pointed at her bed.

"There's a kimono. You know how to put one on?"

"Probably . . . I think."

"You run into trouble, give me a holler."

With that, Takki disappeared into the adjacent room. Youko sat down on the bed and picked up the kimono Takki had laid out for her.

It had an ankle-length skirt that was tied with a cord around the waist, a short, vest-like blouse along with a tunic the same length. It wasn't a comfortable fit when she first put it on. The collar pinched her neck as she walked into the next room, where Takki had set the table.

"Ah, looks just right on you." Takki put down a big bowl of soup and laughed.

“It’s a bit plain, true. Something from when I was younger would have been better.”

“Not at all,” Youko said. “Thank you very much.”

“Even so, it’s a bit too showy for me. I was thinking of giving it away to the neighbors one of these days. Well, let’s eat. Don’t hold back, now. We’ve got a long walk ahead of us.”

“Okay.”

Youko bowed. She sat down at the table. When she picked up the chopsticks, for a moment she remembered what the monkey had said the night before. But it didn’t feel true in the slightest.

She is a good person.

If the villagers knew that Takki had taken her in, they’d no doubt have harsh words for her. Takki had done good by her, and suspecting her now would only invite bad karma.

Chapter 21

[3-5] It was past noon when they left Takki's house.

The trip to Kasai turned out to be an unexpectedly pleasant one. At first, Youko cowered whenever they encountered someone, but perhaps because Takki had dyed her hair with a dye made from herb roots, nobody looked at her suspiciously. She grew accustomed to it after a while and enjoyed meeting people along the way.

Although this country had the look and feel of ancient China, the people came in all different types. Their faces were generally Asian in appearance, but the color of their hair and eyes and skin was all over the place. Skin color varied from that of a white Caucasian to a black African. Eye color was everything from black to sea-blue. As for hair, there seemed to be an infinite variety, such as purple or blue-white. In some of the odder cases, hair was two-toned, as if part of it had been dyed.

Initially, it struck her all as very strange, but she got used to it fairly quickly. And once she did she decided that, yes, different was good. And yet she didn't see anyone with pure, golden hair like Keiki.

Their clothing was in an old Chinese style. Men wore a tunic over short trousers. Women's fashions were based on the long skirt. Now and then she spotted a group dressed in what was certainly an "oriental" style, though from what country and what era she couldn't tell. According to Takki, they were traveling minstrels.

For Youko, it was a relief just to walk. She followed Takki's lead, from getting food to arranging lodgings. Youko had no money, so Takki paid for everything.

"I'm really sorry I can't help out," she said as they walked along the road.

Takki laughed heartily. "I'm just an old busybody. You've got nothing to worry about."

"I've got nothing to give you in exchange."

"Not at all. It's been a long time since I've seen my mum. Thanks to you now

I've got a good excuse to go see her."

Her kind words were a joy to hear. "Takki-san, did you go to Goso to get married?"

"No, that's where I got my *partition*."

"Partition?"

Takki nodded. "When you become an adult, you're given a plot of land and made to stand on your own two feet. The plot I received was in Goso. That's what a partition is."

"Everybody receives land when they become an adult?"

"Yes, everybody. My husband is the old guy who lives next door. We split up after our child died."

Youko stared at Takki's jovial face. Now that she mentioned it, she had mentioned something about a child dying. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I wasn't cut out to be a mother. The child we were blessed with after so long, she died on my account."

"Surely you don't mean . . ."

"Children come to us from heaven. So heaven taking her back again wasn't up to me. But people being what they are, I guess it was inevitable. It's too bad about the child, though."

Youko had no idea how to answer but managed a wan smile. In a small way Takki seemed a sad and lonely person.

"I imagine your mum must be worried sick about you. The faster you get home the better, no?"

"Yes." Youko nodded. "But is it really possible? When I was in Hairou, one of the town elders said it wasn't."

"Well, if you got here somehow, surely you can go back."

Youko nodded again. The carefree smile that came to her lips reflected a profound happiness.

"Of course. Ah, here we are."

At the fork of three roads, one pointed to the left. At every intersection along the road there was always a small stone marker into which was carved distance and destination. Distance was measured in units called “ri.” This particular marker listed the destination as “Sei” and the distance as “5 ri.”

According to what she remembered from her Japanese history textbook, a Japanese ri was two and a half miles. The ri referred to here was a much shorter distance, only several hundred yards. So five ri was not that far.

The scenery itself was prosaic, but the peace and quiet was quite nice. The mountains loomed craggy and tall above the rolling terrain. In the distance, she could barely make out the peaks wrapped with clouds. None were covered with snow. The sky pressed low against the ground.

Spring seemed to have arrived here a month earlier than in Tokyo. Flowers bloomed along the rice paddy dikes. Youko recognized some. Others were new to her.

Here and there amidst the fields several small houses were huddled together. These were villages, Takki told her, for the people who worked the land. A little further along they came to a larger settlement enclosed by a tall wall. This was a town, and where people in the surrounding areas lived during the winter.

“So where people live is different during the winter than in the other seasons?”

“There are a few oddballs that live in the villages during the winters, but the rest of us have better things to do than camp out in the fields. The towns are much more comfortable. And safer.”

“Those walls sure are thick. They’re to protect you from the youma, right?”

“Youma wouldn’t attack a town like that. It’s mostly to protect from wars and wild animals.”

“Wild animals?”

“Wolves and bears. A panther or tiger will turn up now and then, though you don’t find them much around these parts. In the winter when game is hard to find they come down to where people are.”

“How do people arrange housing during the winter? Do they rent?”

“You’re also given a house when you become an adult. Most people sell right away, though some rent to the townsfolk when they go back to the village. The ones that sell out rent during the winter. That’s the most common.”

“Oh.”

The cities were guarded by high castle ramparts. The only way in and out of a city was through a reinforced gate. Guards were posted at the gate and they inspected every person who entered or left.

Usually the guards just guarded the gate, Takki said. They were particularly interested in any red-haired young women amongst the travelers, no doubt on the lookout for a kaikyaku who had run away from Hairou.

Inside the gate the houses were packed together. Shops lined the crisscrossing avenues. The streets were busy with vagrants. A number of people had set up house tents along the base of the inner walls.

“If everybody receives their own land, why do they have to live in tents?”

When Youko pointed at the tents Takki raised her eyebrows. “Those are refugees from the Kingdom of Kei. A sorry lot. There’s a great unrest in Kei these days. The refugees run away from the youma and the wars and collect together like that. When it gets warmer, their numbers will increase.”

“It looks like there’s unrest here, too.”

“Indeed. It’s not only Kei. To the north, I hear there’s trouble in the Kingdom of Tai. They say it’s even worse there.”

Youko only nodded. Japan was a peaceful country in comparison. Here there were wars, and nothing good could be said about the state of law and order. They didn’t let their belongings out of their sight for a second. Unsavory characters propositioned her any number of times, and a tough-looking gang tried to draw her away. But Takki scolded them with a lively stream of invective and rescued her.

The lack of security was probably why nobody traveled at night. The city gate was shut as well. A traveler had to make it to the next town or city by the time

the sun set.

“You said it takes about four months to travel from one kingdom to another?”

“That’s right.”

“Is there any other way to travel than walking?”

“There’s horse and cart as well. But you got to be rich. Someone like me wouldn’t be able to afford it, not in a whole lifetime.”

This was an impoverished world compared to her own. No cars, no gas or electricity. Not even running water. This could not simply be due to the delayed development of civilization. She’d gathered from their conversations that at the root of the problem was the lack of any oil or coal technology.

She asked Takki, “So how did you learn so much about the other kingdoms? Have you been to Kei or Tai?”

“Of course not,” Takki laughed. “I’ve never been out of Kou. We peasants don’t do much in the way of traveling like that. Got to take care of the fields. You find out about the other kingdoms from listening to what the minstrels have to say.”

“Traveling actors and musicians, you mean?”

“Yes. There are those among them that have traveled around the world. In their performances they tell stories about how they went here and saw this and how they went there and saw that. Tales from all the cities and all the kingdoms.”

“Wow,” Youko said. In her world, back in the olden days, people used to watch newsreels at the theater. It must be like that, she thought.

In any case, it was great having a guide along to answer her questions. Youko didn’t know a thing about this world, and the anxiety that accompanied that ignorance was frightening. But with a helpful person at her side, someone who could explain things one by one as they came along, it was all quite fascinating.

They completed the trip without incident. A world that had struck her as harsh and cruel had become a thing of great curiosity and interest.

Every night she was visited by the strange visions, that left her homesick and

depressed. The blue monkey showed up, too, and made things worse. But the raw feelings didn't last.

Once they got up the next morning and started out, it was one fascinating scene after another. Takki was as nice to her as she could have hoped for. Borrowing strength from the jewel she could keep on walking without getting tired. And knowing that at night they would be eating a good meal and sleeping in a decent bed made it all the more tolerable.

It was hard being so far from her home, but at least she now had a caring guardian at her side. She couldn't be thankful enough that she'd been lucky enough to meet her.

Chapter 22

[3-6] The three-day journey was soon over and even proved somewhat anticlimactic. On the third day, the tall buildings of Kasai rising above the river plain told them that they'd arrived. It was the first place Youko had seen that looked like a real city.

"Well . . . it is big," Youko said, as they passed through the gate and got a chance to look around.

Takki chuckled. "Around these parts, the only city bigger than Kasai is Takkyuu, the district capital."

A district was the next step up from a prefecture. Youko didn't have a good grasp of the relative sizes involved. She didn't think that Takki did either. When she spoke of the "government," it was sufficient for her to mean the town hall or maybe the prefectural seat.

Inside the gate, stores large and small lined the main road. They were different from those in the towns they'd passed through up to now. These were grand and luxurious, reminding Youko of Chinatown in Yokohama. The big buildings had glass windows that were quite impressive. It was still early in the afternoon and the street was not crowded, but she had the feeling that come closing time and the place would be packed with travelers.

Thinking about her decision to live in this bustling city, her mood improved a bit. No matter where she settled down, even in one of the towns, she couldn't complain. But it went without saying that a lively place like this was better.

Takki turned off the main road, towards a block of smaller-scale shops. The area had a vaguely run-down feeling, but there was no change in the hustle-bustle atmosphere. A number of businesses were organized into a kind of medieval strip mall that shared a common roof. Takki headed towards the most elegant one.

A three-story building with bright green pillars. They entered the imposing front doors into a large restaurant that took up the whole of the first floor. Takki

left Youko to admire the splendid accouterments and grabbed the waiter who came out to greet them.

“Call the mistress for me, will you? Say her daughter’s come to see her. You got that?”

The man’s face broke into a grin and he hurried out of sight. Takki watched him leave, then sat Youko down at the nearest table. “You wait here. Go ahead and order something. Everything’s really good.”

“Are you sure it’s okay?” This restaurant was bigger than any inn or dining hall they’d been in so far.

“Don’t worry about it. My mum will pick up the tab. Treat yourself, anything you want.”

Even so, Youko couldn’t really follow the menu. Sensing that, Takki laughed, summoned a waiter and ordered a few things. The waiter bowed and left. At the same time, from the back of the restaurant appeared a woman just old enough to be called an “old woman.”

“Mother,” said Takki, standing up and smiling. The old woman reacted with a cheerful expression. Watching attentively, Youko saw with relief that she came across as a pleasant person. With her as her boss, working here couldn’t be that bad.

“Youko, you wait here, okay? I have to talk over a few things with my mum.”

“Yes,” Youko said with a nod.

Takki smiled and hurried after her mother. The two patted each other on the back and laughed together. They disappeared into the back. Youko watched them leave with a smile. She placed Takki’s rucksack next to the table and paused to look around the restaurant.

For some reason, there seemed to be no female employees. All the waiters and busboys were men, as were most of the customers. She caught several of them glancing in her direction, checking her out. Without really knowing why, she began to feel very unsettled.

A short time later, a group of four men came in. They sat themselves down at

an adjacent table, turned and leered at her, whispered amongst themselves and burst into laughter. Their behavior was starting to creep her out.

As she scanned the restaurant, she saw no hint of Takki returning. She put up with it the best she could, but then one of the four got up and walked towards her. She scrambled to her feet, ignored the man calling after her and caught the attention of a waiter. “Um . . . do you know where I can find Takki-san?”

He curtly pointed towards the back of the restaurant. Figuring he meant for her to go find Takki by herself, Youko set off in the direction he had indicated, lugging the rucksack along with her. Nobody tried to stop her.

She made her way along a narrow corridor and emerged into what looked like the building’s cluttered back rooms, feeling somehow self-conscious as she crept along. She at last came upon a beautifully carved door. The door was open. From behind a screen that blocked the middle of the room from view came Takki’s voice.

“Really, there’s nothing to worry about!”

“But, my dear, she’s being sought by the police!”

The reluctance in the old woman’s voice triggered a sudden rush of anxiety that made Youko stop and crane her neck. Of course Takki’s mother wouldn’t want to hire a kaikyaku. Youko resisted the impulse to rush in and bow her head and beg. That would be too presumptuous. At the same time, she was in too desperate a state of mind to return to the restaurant.

“Oh, what’s a kaikyaku? Just somebody who got lost, no? All that stuff about them making bad things happen, you don’t believe those old superstitions, do you?”

“Not at all, but what if the officials find out?”

“Nobody says anything, nobody finds out anything. That girl’s not going to talk. Think about it, she’s a bargain find, don’t you think? Not bad looking, not too old. She’d be handy to have around.”

“Yes, but . . .”

“Behaves herself, too. You teach her how to treat the guests and she’ll be

bringing 'em in the front door. All you have to do is take her off my hands for a reasonable price. What's there to worry about?"

Youko tilted her head to one side. Takki's tone of voice was . . . odd. It wasn't good manners to eavesdrop but she wasn't going to stop listening now. She began to hear something else as well, almost subconsciously, a sound like the faint roar of the ocean.

"But a kaikyaku . . ."

"With no strings attached! Think of that. No parents or brothers storming in and raising a ruckus. Right from the start it'll be like she doesn't even exist. None of the usual fuss and bother."

"But does she really have what it takes to work here?"

"She said so herself. I told her it was a hotel. She thought I meant working as a maid or something. That girl is quite the little fool."

Youko knew something was terribly wrong. She was "that girl." Up until that moment, Takki had always addressed her so warmly and sincerely. Youko didn't sense a speck of that compassion now. What was she to make of this? It was like she was listening to the voice of a completely different person.

"But . . ."

"Everybody knows what those green pillars mean, and what kind of a woman works at a place that has them. She'd better know the difference, too, when it comes to earning her keep."

Youko's eyes flew open wide. The shock didn't knock her flat only because she was still holding onto Takki's rucksack. The monkey told her. Why hadn't she listened more closely to its warnings?

Shock, and then anger. Her pulse raced. Her constricted breath was hot in her throat. The sound of the ocean roared in her ears, deafening her. *So that's what this has been about.* She took a tight grip of the sword, still wrapped up like a parcel. A moment later she settled herself down and instead turned on her heels and retreated down the narrow hallway the way she had come. Pretending that nothing at all was amiss, she strode through the restaurant and headed for the exit.

At a brisk pace, Youko stepped through the doors and again looked up at the building. The pillars and beams, even the window frames, were painted green. She'd figured out what it meant in the nick of time. She was still carrying Takki's rucksack. No way was she going back inside to return it.

Almost as if on cue, a second-floor window opened. A woman leaned against the ornate balcony railing and stared out at the world. Her gleaming kimono was rumpled and undone, the collar wide and open. Her occupation was as plain as the nose on her face.

Youko shuddered with revulsion. As if sensing that she was being watched, the woman looked down at her, laughed derisively, and closed the window.

Chapter 23

[3-7] “Hey, miss.”

At the sound of the voice behind her, Youko tore her gaze away from the second floor balcony. Standing not far away were the four men from before. One of them said to her, “You work there?”

“Not hardly,” she spat back.

She turned to leave. The man grabbed her arm and sidled in front of her, blocking her way. “Like hell you don’t. What kind of woman eats at a place like that?”

“The person I was with knows someone there.”

“And what was *that* person up to, eh? Maybe she came here to sell you?”

The man grasped her chin with his hand. Youko swatted it away. “Not a chance. Get your hands off me.”

The man laughed. “Now, she’s a spunky one.” He yanked her closer. “C’mon, missy, let me buy you a drink.”

“Drop dead. Let go of me.”

“Tell the truth, she was selling you off, right? And you’re wanting us to overlook the fact you was running out on the deal, eh?”

“I would never—” With all her strength Youko jerked her arm free of the man’s grip. “I would never work at a place like that. I’m not for sale.”

She strode away from him, looking for a way out. The man grabbed her again, this time by the shoulders. She ducked and slipped free. Before he could come at her again, her hand was on the hilt of the sword.

Humans held the sea inside them. And right now the waves were surging violently, threatening to break out of her body and pound down upon the man there in front of her.

“I said, hands off.”

Her arm flashed and the cloth unraveled from the sword. The man retreated, goggle-eyed. “Son of a bitch . . . ”

“If you don’t want to get hurt then get out of my way.”

The man sized up Youko and the sword. He chortled, “You even know how to use that thing?”

Wordlessly Youko raised the sword, aligning the tip with the man’s throat. This was a dangerous weapon she’d been given, this claw of hers, this talon. “Move it. Go back to the restaurant. Your friends are waiting for you.”

Nearby somebody shouted. Youko did not avert her gaze. Raising a sword in the middle of the street like this would no doubt cause a disturbance, but now was not the time to second-guess herself. The man’s eyes flicked back and forth between Youko and the tip of the sword. Slowly he retreated. Just as he seemed ready to turn and run back into the restaurant, a scream reverberated across the street.

“That girl! Somebody grab that girl!”

Youko looked in the direction of the voice. Takki was standing in the door of the restaurant yelling at her. An awful anger engulfed her, an awful thing like what she had seen in her dreams, like a blood-red tide engulfing the sea.

“She’s running away. Get her!”

The disgust that Youko felt welling up inside her almost made her sick. It was directed as much at herself as it was at that woman, who had deceived her with a beatific smile on her face.

People flooded out of the restaurant and flocked from the adjacent streets. Youko didn’t let down her guard. She flipped the hilt of the sword over in her hand, brandishing the wide blade. Whether or not anybody ended up dead, that was up to Jouyuu. And if it went as far as somebody trying to arrest her again, well, there was a small part of her that wouldn’t be too averse to a bit of killing.

Nobody will have you as an ally in this world.

She thought Takki was going to help her. She was so thankful to her. Over and over she had thanked her lucky stars. She’d really believed, that’s what made it

so sickening.

She made note of the men rushing towards her. Jouyuu's tendrils crawled through the arms and down her legs. Her body moved with an extraordinarily natural grace. Every obstruction before her she shut out of her mind.

"Get her! Get her! She cost me a fortune!"

At the sound of Takki's hysterical voice Youko glanced back over her shoulder. For a moment the deceived and the deceiver locked eyes. With a frightened expression Takki retreated two, three steps. Youko stared her down with cold eyes, steeled herself against the rush of men. She dodged the first and second, smacked the third with the blade.

Almost before she knew it the men had gathered in a human wall around her. Youko clucked softly to herself. Cutting her way through without killing anybody wasn't going to be easy.

Takki stamped her feet on the ground. "Catch her and there's a reward in it for you!"

From the back of the crowd came a scream. The crowd turned as one. In that same instant the grating, noisy shrieks were that much closer.

"What's going on?"

"She'll get away."

"No, over there."

The human wall swayed to and fro. Youko surveyed the street beyond them. A wave of people bore down on them, crying out as they ran *away*, scrambling frantically not to be left behind.

"*Youma.*"

Youko's arm responded in a flash.

"A youma . . ."

"A *bafuku*!"

"Get out of here!"

The human wall crumbled and scattered. Within it, Youko set off at a run.

From behind her echoed a scream. She saw a beast mowing down everyone in front of it as it galloped along. It was a huge tiger. The tiger had a human face stained with splotches of red. Youko ran down the street, dancing out of the way of people diving for cover in the surrounding shops and stores.

The tiger quickly closed the distance between them. She had no choice but to stop and make her stand.

She faced the tiger's disconcertingly human expression, regripped the hilt of the sword and settled into her stance. The tiger charged at her in a gust of wind. She pivoted to the side and brought the sword down with all her might. A spray of blood accompanied the sound of impact and she knew she could have avoided the blood if she hadn't closed her eyes in the moment that the blow landed.

She slashed at the striped limbs, skipped out of the way as the tiger toppled over, and took off at a run. The beast picked itself up and chased after her. She parried with the sword, feinted with her feet, and raced down an alleyway.

She emerged into the main thoroughfare and found there a crowd of people who hadn't grasped exactly what was going on. "Get out of the way!"

At the sound of Youko's voice and the sight of the beast chasing after her, the crowd scattered.

And then . . . "*What?*"

There in the distance, a flash of gold. It was beyond the crowd, too far away to make out any facial features. She didn't have the time to take a good, long look, but she knew that kind of golden hair was out of the ordinary.

"Keiki!"

Without thinking, she set off after him. In the next moment the golden glow was swallowed up in the stampede of human beings.

"Keiki?"

A shadow fell across the sun. The huge tiger sailed over Youko's head. The youma landed amongst the fleeing throng. People screamed, trampled beneath the huge paws. Youko checked her forward motion and ducked out of the way.

Keiki? Who else could it have been?

She didn't have time to think about it. She slammed another blow into the pursuing beast. Then taking advantage of the confusion all around her, slipped away through the streets of Kasai.

Chapter 24

[3-8] The monkey said, “I told you so.”

It was the middle of the night. The monkey’s head floated above the stone marker standing at the side of the road. After leaving Kasai and wandering about for a while, Youko had continued on down the highway.

She was on her own again. In the process she’d ended up with Takki’s rucksack. In the bag was a change of clothes and Takki’s purse. There was enough money in her purse that if she ate and slept in cheap dives along the way she could make it last a bit. The theft didn’t bother her conscience a bit.

“I warned you, silly girl.”

Youko ignored him. The glowing blue head tagged along, as if skating on ice, as she walked along. Youko zoned out the monkey and its screeching laughter. She knew she’d been an idiot to let herself be fooled so badly. She didn’t need to hear it from the monkey too.

Besides, she had more pressing things on her mind than the monkey, such as the gold-haired man she’d seen in Kasai and the appearance of the youma in the middle of the city.

Youma aren’t supposed to go where people live.

Takki had said as much, said that it was rare that such a thing should happen.

Youma never show up in the middle of the day.

The tiger in Kasai, the dog-like creatures that attacked the wagon, the kochou that had shown up at her school, they’d shown up during the day or in the early evening. But they were the exceptions.

Was it because Keiki was there?”

The monkey’s piercing laughter interrupted her mid-thought. “Little girl, it’s because you’re such an easy mark!”

This was impossible for her to ignore. “It’s not!”

“Oh, but it is. Think about it carefully, little girl. Even you find it most strange, do you not?”

Youko bit her lip. She was determined to believe in Keiki. If she couldn't believe in him, she would have nothing to fall back on. Nevertheless, her doubts continued to grow.

“He pulled the wool over your eyes, little girl. He gave you the shaft, he did.”

“No, he didn't.”

“I simply cannot comprehend this stubbornness of yours.” The monkey said with a smirk, “Unless it's your way of refusing to see what a fine fix you really are in.”

“Keiki protected me from the kochou. Keiki is my friend.”

“Really? Is he? And since coming here, exactly how has he helped you? It was that one time only, no?”

Youko stared long and hard at the monkey. How could it know about what had happened before she came to this world? The tone of his voice gave her the creeps.

“What do you mean, that one time?”

“Over yonder, I mean. When you were attacked by the kochou, I mean.”

“How could you know anything about what happened there?”

The monkey screeched, “Oh, I know *everything* about you, little girl. I know how much you distrusted Keiki. How hard you tried to get away from him. You don't want to believe how much he totally used you.”

Youko averted her gaze and stared at the dark road. “That's not . . . true.”

“Then why hasn't he come to help you?”

“Something must have happened.”

“What possibly could have happened? Didn't he say he was going to protect you, little girl? Let us think this thing through. It was a trap, right? Do you get it now?”

“Other than at the school, I can't be sure that I really saw him those other two

times. It couldn't have been him!"

"Have you been seeing a lot of golden-haired chaps around these parts?"

I don't want to listen to this.

"And wasn't your Jouyuu convinced it was Keiki as well?"

How could he know about Jouyuu? As she thought about this, staring off into the distance, the monkey's mocking eyes suddenly collided with hers.

"I know *everything*. Just like I told you."

Taiho. That voice was suddenly alive in her memory. She shook her head. She would never forget the surprise contained in that one word "No. That's not right. Keiki is not my enemy."

"Are you certain? Really certain? Yes, but that would be nice."

"Shut up!"

The monkey turned its eyes towards the heavens. He whispered, "Want to know what I think?"

"I don't want to hear it."

"It was Keiki who sent those youma to attack you."

Youko couldn't move. The monkey looked at her blank, wide-eyed stare and leered at her.

She said, "No way."

The monkey roared with mirth, peals of laughter that went on and on like the ravings of a madman.

"There's no way!"

"Are you so sure about that?"

"He'd have no reason to do anything like that!"

"No reason?" the monkey inquired with a crooked smile.

"Why would Keiki do something like that? It was Keiki who saved me from the Kochou, wasn't it? He gave me this sword, and put Jouyuu inside me. It's only thanks to him that I'm still alive."

The monkey giggled gleefully.

“If he wanted to kill me, he could have done it right then and there.”

“He had you attacked on purpose so he could save you and be your pal. Did you ever think of that?”

Youko bit her lip. “Yes, but now that I’ve got Jouyuu it won’t be so easy. If he wanted to kill me now, he’d have to exorcize Jouyuu out of me first.”

“But maybe his goal isn’t to kill you.”

“Then what?”

“Hmm, I wonder. Well, you’d better figure it out eventually. They are really coming after you now.”

Youko scowled at the bobbing, chortling head and quickened her pace. “You can’t go home.” The monkey’s voice followed after her. “Not at all, little girl. You’re going to die here, my dear.”

“No way.”

“But there’s always a way, isn’t there? *If it hurts so much, it could all be over in an instant.*”

“Shut up!” Youko shouted.

Her words were swallowed up in the darkness.

Part IV

Chapter 25

[4-1] Youko continued on her aimless trek for two more days with only the blue monkey as her companion. She had no other goal but to get as far away from Hairou and Kasai as possible.

The gates of every city were closely watched by the guards. Travelers were carefully inspected. Word must have gotten out that a runaway kaikyaku from Hairou had shown up in Kasai. At the smaller towns, the small number of people coming and going meant that it was impossible to mingle with the crowds and sneak past the guards.

Youko had no choice but to keep to the highway and camp in the fields at night. On the third day, she arrived at a city even larger than Kasai. It was surrounded by a high, fortified wall studded with parapets. “Takkyuu Castle,” it said above the gate. This, then, was the district capital.

Shops lined the thoroughfare all the way up to the gates of the city. At other cities, the fields and farms spread out from the shadow of the walls. Here at Takkyuu peddlers had set up a market outside the city walls and the fields were covered with tents. Buyers and sellers jammed the roads that encircled the city.

Inside the crude tents there was something for everybody. Pushing her way through the throngs in front of the gate, Youko spied a tent with piles of clothing stacked up inside. It occurred to her that it might be a good idea to buy some used boy’s clothes. Traveling alone as a young woman only invited trouble. With Jouyuu’s help she could get out of trouble easily enough, but it’d be better to avoid a fight in the first place.

Youko purchased an outfit made of a thick material that resembled canvas. It consisted of a sleeveless, knee-length tunic and a pair of short trousers. The kind of clothing she’d seen farmers wearing, as well as poor people and refugees from Kei, including women.

She snuck away for a moment and changed clothes out of view of the street. In only half a month she'd burned off all the baby fat in her body, so much so that the fit of men's clothing wasn't half bad.

Youko had mixed emotions seeing her lean frame. Her arms and legs had gone through a hard, grueling workout. Her scrawniness only exaggerated the definition of her muscles. At home in her old world, she approached the bathroom scales with great trepidation. The diet she could never stay on she had now taken to with a vengeance. It was really quite funny.

She suddenly thought of blue, a deep navy blue, a bright kind of indigo. The color of jeans. She'd always wanted a pair of jeans.

When she was in elementary school, there was an athletic field day she got to participate in. The boys and girls were split into two teams and competed against each other. Because you couldn't really move around in a dress, she talked her mother into buying her some jeans. But when her father saw them he was livid.

"Your father doesn't think girls should wear clothing like that."

"But everybody wears them!"

"Your father doesn't like it. He thinks it's indecent for girls to dress up like boys, and talk like boys. He won't stand for it."

"But there'll be races. I'll lose if I have to wear a skirt!"

"Losing to boys is nothing to be ashamed of."

"But . . ."

When Youko wanted to argue further, her mother took the upper hand. She bowed deeply. "I'm sorry, Youko, but you have to apologize to your father."

So she did, and the jeans were returned to the store.

"This stinks."

"Have patience, Youko."

"But why did I have to apologize to father? I didn't do anything wrong!"

"You'll understand when you get married. It's best this way . . ."

Remembering the scene now, Youko burst out laughing. If her father could see her now—wearing boy’s clothing, carrying a sword, camping out in a field when an inn wasn’t available—oh, the look on his face! She could imagine him apoplectic with rage.

That’s the kind of person he is, my father. A girl should be charming and chaste. That’s all that mattered. And humble and reserved and obedient to a fault. A girl needn’t be smart or strong. She’d believed it, too, for a long time.

She said aloud, “But it’s not true!”

What good did it do her, getting meekly and humbly arrested? Or meekly and humbly letting Takki sell her to a brothel?

Youko gripped her shrouded sword. Of all the things she should have done differently, she wished she’d shown a bit more backbone when she first met Keiki. At least ask what this was all about. Where were they going? In what direction, to what destination, and when were they coming back? If she’d done that she wouldn’t be in this fix, up the creek and without a clue.

Being weak was no way to stay safe. If she didn’t push her brains and her body to the limits, she wasn’t going to survive.

Survive.

She was going to survive, she was going home. Those were the only desires she would permit herself.

She sold the outfit she’d been wearing and the rest of Takki’s thing to a used clothing dealer, taking a little money in exchange. Money in hand, she mingled with the crowds moving through the gate. None of the guards flagged her down. Once inside she headed towards the heart of the city. She’d learned from Takki that inns got cheaper the farther away from the gate.

“What’ll it be, boy?” she was asked when she walked into the inn. Youko smiled to herself. Most inns ran a dining hall on the side. It was typical to get asked for an order right off the bat.

Youko glanced around the premises. The atmosphere of the dining hall told her a lot. This inn was no high class establishment but it wasn’t skid row.

“Are there any vacancies?” she asked.

The innkeeper gave Youko an inquisitive look. “You by yourself?”

When Youko nodded the innkeeper said, “Hundred sen. You got money, I assume?”

Youko answered by showing the purse. It was common practice to pay when checking out.

The currency of the realm was coin. There were several kinds of square and round coins. The square coins had the higher value. Money was counted in *sen*. The value was engraved on the face of the coin. There were also gold and silver coins but she hadn’t seen paper money.

“You need anything?”

Youko shook her head. The only thing that came free with the room was access to the well. Everything else—use of the bath, food and drink—was *a la carte*. She’d figured this out on her travels with Takki, and so had already gotten something to eat at a food cart outside the gate.

The innkeeper nodded curtly and called out to the back room, “Hey, we’ve got a guest. Show him to his room.”

An old man promptly emerged from the back room and bowed in response. A smile frozen on his face, with his gaze he directed Youko towards the interior of the inn. Relieved to have so easily gotten herself a room, she followed after him.

Chapter 26

[4-2] They climbed the stairs at the back of the inn to the fourth floor. These buildings were all made out of wood and in big cities usually topped out at three floors. This inn apparently had a fourth. The ceiling was low enough that Youko could reach up and touch it. A big woman like Takki would have to stoop over.

She was shown a small room, not much more than six by six feet, with a wooden floor. A set of high shelves lined the wall at the back of the room, piled with some faded futons. There wasn't a bed. She'd sleep on a futon on the floor.

Next to the wall, the shelves forced her to bend over, even kneeling down. She could stand up in the front half of the room. The back half of the room was for sleeping. The rooms she'd stayed in with Takki had high ceilings and beds and even a table and cost something like five-hundred sen a night.

Because this wasn't the safest part of town, she'd be sure to lock the door coming in and going out. The old man handed Youko the key and started to leave.

Youko stopped him and said, "Excuse me, but where can I find the well?"

The old man jerked around like a dog running past the end of his leash. His eyes grew wide. For several long moments he stared at her.

"Um . . ." said Youko. Thinking he hadn't heard her correctly, she repeated the question. The old man's eyes grew wider.

"Japanese!" he said, and all but ran back into her room. "Do you come from Japan?"

When Youko didn't answer he grabbed her by the arm. "You're a kaikyaku? When did you get here? Where you from? Speak Japanese to me again."

Youko could only stand there and look at him.

"Please, do like you was talking before. I haven't heard Japanese spoken for years and years."

"I, ah . . ."

“I’m from Japan, too. Go ahead, let me hear you speak Japanese.”

From within his eyes, deeply set in his wrinkled face, tears welled up, sparkling and clear. Youko felt herself start to tear up as well. What a strange coincidence this was, that in this strange land, in a corner of this big city, the two of them should have met.

She said, “You’re a kaikyaku, then?”

The old man nodded. Over and over, impatiently, bobbing his head as if words would not come. He gripped Youko’s arm with gnarled fingers. She could see in the firmness of his hold on her what kind of loneliness he had endured. She squeezed his hand in return.

“Tea?” he asked in a tremulous voice. “You want some tea?”

Youko bowed her head.

“You drink tea, don’t you? Ain’t much, but I got me some green tea. You wait here while I go fetch it, okay?”

“Thank you.”

The old man returned a short time later with two teacups. Youko thanked him graciously. The sudden smell of green tea brought back memories of home. Closely observing Youko as she tasted the tea in her mouth, the man sat down on the floor in front of her.

“So happy to meet you. I told ’em I was sick and skipped out on work. Tell me, boy . . . no, girl, ain’t you? What’s your name?”

“Youko Nakajima.”

Ah, the old man’s eyes replied. “I’m Seizou Matsuyama. My Japanese isn’t too strange for you, is it?”

Youko wanted to nod, but shook her head. He did have an accent but she could understand him well enough.

“Well, then.” The old man looked happy enough to cry. Indeed, he seemed to be laughing and crying at the same time. He asked, “Where was you born?”

“Where was I born? In Tokyo.”

Seizou gripped his teacup. “Tokyo? I can’t hardly believe that Tokyo is still standing.”

“Say what?”

He paid no mind to Youko’s response, wiped his cheeks with the sleeve of his tunic. “I was born in Kouchi, in Shikoku. I was living in Kure when I came here.”

“Kure?”

“Kure, in Hiroshima. You know Kure?”

Youko nodded, trying to recall her old geography lessons. “I think I remember hearing about it before.”

The old man laughed bitterly. “There was a naval base arsenal there. I worked in the harbor.”

“So you moved from Kouchi to Hiroshima?”

“My mom was staying at her parent’s place in Kure at the time. The house got burnt up in an air raid, third of July it was. So she sent me to live with my uncle. He said he wouldn’t feed me just for sittin’ around all day, so I got a job. That’s when we was attacked and the boat I was comin’ into harbor on got near sunk. I fell overboard in all the confusion.”

Youko realized he was talking about the Second World War.

“And when I came to I was in the Kyokai. I was adrift on the sea when I got rescued.”

The way the old man pronounced “Kyokai” was slightly different from what Youko was used to hearing, closer to “Kokai.”

“So . . . that’s how it happened.”

“There’d been real bad air raids before then, too, even after the arsenal was reduced to rubble. There was ships at the naval base but they couldn’t help. The Setonaikai^[5] and the Suou Sea being all full of mines, the ships couldn’t get through.

“Oh,” said Youko.

“Tokyo was bombed in March, the whole place turned to ashes. Same thing

happened to Osaka in June, a big air raid burned down the city. Luzon and Okinawa surrendered. Honestly, I didn't think we was going to win. We lost, didn't we?"

"Um . . . yes."

The old man sighed deeply. "Figures. For a long time I had the feeling that's the way things was headed."

Youko didn't really understand this feeling. Her parents were born after the war. None of her older relatives ever talked about those times. It was like ancient history to her, the kind of things you learned about in textbooks or from movies or television.

Nevertheless, what he was talking about was not as distant to her as this world. Although she couldn't picture in her mind what he was talking about very well, it was gratifying to hear such deeply familiar places and historical events spoken of again.

"So Tokyo's still around. Well, I suppose that Japan belongs to the United States, now."

"Not hardly!" Youko exclaimed.

The old man's eyes widened in turn. "Is that so, is that so. But, miss, what's with those eyes of yours?"

After a moment of bewilderment, she realized that he was referring to her eyes. Her eyes had turned an emerald green since coming here. She hesitated then said, "This has got nothing to do with that."

The old man bowed and shook his head. "No, no. Forget I said anything. It's just that I was so sure about Japan being made into a colony of America. It ain't being so, pay no mind, pay no mind."

Here under distant, foreign skies, this old man continued to fret about his motherland, whose fate he could not ascertain for himself. What might become of their country neither he nor Youko could know. It was only with the passage of time that these sentiments had become so much deeper. It must have been hard enough being thrown into the maelstrom of this world. But on top of it all this old man had for half a century continued to nurse these affections for his

homeland.

He said, “And is His Majesty doing well?”

“You mean the Showa Emperor^[6]? If you mean the Showa Emperor, well, he survived the war okay, but he’s . . .”

Dead, she was going to say. She corrected herself and phrased it more politely. “He unfortunately has passed away.”

The old man’s head jerked up, and then he bowed deeply, pressed his sleeves to his eyes. After a moment of hesitation, Youko patted his rounded shoulders. As he did not seem offended, she continued to stroke the man’s almost skeletal back until his weeping had subsided.

Chapter 27

[4-3] The old man said, "Sorry about that. You cry more easily when you get to be my age."

Youko didn't say anything, only shook her head.

"So . . . what year was it?"

"What year?" Youko echoed.

The old man looked back at her with an inscrutable expression. He said, "When did the Great War end?"

"In 1945."

"Showa?"

"Um . . ." Youko had to think about it for a minute, digging out of her memory the chronological tables she'd memorized for her high school exams. "Showa 20^[7], I think."

"Showa 20?" He stared at her. "I came here in Showa 20! When in Showa 20?"

"August . . . August 15th."

The old man balled his hands into fists. "August? The 15th of August, Showa 20?"

"Yes . . ."

"I was thrown overboard on July the 28th!" He glared at her. "Not more than half a month before!"

Not having the slightest idea what to say, Youko could only bow her head, quietly, patiently, as the old man railed on, spelling out all the sacrifices he had suffered because of the war.

It was close to midnight when he finally got around to asking Youko about herself. Her family, her home, what kind of house she lived in, what kind of life she had led. Answering these questions was a bit painful. It struck her forcefully that here was a person, born well before her time, who had been transported to

this place and had never returned.

Was that to be her fate as well? Would she live her whole life in this strange country and never go home? At least she'd had the good fortune of meeting a fellow kaikyaku. When she thought about all the time the old man has been by himself, it really was a stroke of good luck.

"So tell me, what did I do to deserve this?" The old man sat cross-legged with his elbows on his knees, head in his hands. "My friends and family all gone, me ending up in this strange place. I was expecting to die in one of them air raids, anyways. But to think it would've been all ended in half a month. Just half a month!"

Youko still had nothing to say.

"The war ending, that would have turned everything around. Instead I ended up here, not once ever being able to enjoy myself, not even have a decent meal."

"Yes, but . . ."

"Lots of times I tell myself it'd be better if I'd died in an air raid, better than coming to this strange place where I got no sense of what or where anything is and don't understand a thing nobody says at all."

Youko looked at him in surprise. "You don't understand what anybody says?"

"Not at all. Just a few words here and there. That's why this kind of job is all the work I can get." He gave Youko a suspicious look. "You get what they're saying?"

"Yes . . ." Youko said, her gaze steady. "It sounds like Japanese to me."

"Nonsense," the old man said, an astonished look on his face. "The only Japanese I ever heard, save me talking to myself, was from you, starting today. I don't know what kind of words they're speaking, but I got the feeling it's something like Chinese. Ain't nothing like Japanese, that's for damn sure."

"But don't they write with kanji?"

"Yeah, they write it. But Chinese-type characters. There's some Chinamen working at the harbor and them's the kind of words they use."

"That can't be possible!" Youko looked at the old man, a tumult of emotions

coursing through her. “I haven’t had a single problem with the language since coming here, not one. If they were speaking something other than Japanese, there’s no way I could understand them.”

“Then you was understanding what they was saying downstairs earlier?”

“Of course.”

The old man shook his head. “Whatever you think you been hearing, it ain’t Japanese. Nobody here speaks Japanese.”

What in the world was going on, Youko wondered, her confusion only deepening. There was no doubt in her mind that what she was hearing was Japanese. But the old man was telling her it wasn’t Japanese. She could not discern any measurable difference what she’d been hearing all along and the language he was speaking.

She said, “This is the Kingdom of Kou. *Kou* is written with the kanji that means “skillful,” right?”

“Yes.”

“We’re *kaikyaku*, and we came from across the *Kyokai*. It means, the Sea of Emptiness.”

“Right again.”

“This city is the prefectural seat.”

“Prefectural seat? It’s a castle town. A fiefdom, you mean.”

“No, like the prefectural offices in Japan.”

“Like a prefectural office?”

“Where the governor lives.”

“The governor, you say? No governor lives here. The head guy here is the magistrate.”

What is he talking about, Youko muttered to herself. “I’ve always heard him called governor.”

“Ain’t no such person.”

“During the winter, people live in the towns, and when spring comes they return to the villages.”

“People live in villages. In the spring they go back to the hamlets.”

“Yes, but I . . . ”

The old man stared fiercely at her. “Who the hell are you!”

“I’m . . . ”

“You’re not a kaikyaku like me at all! I’ve been here by myself in this strange country forever! Abandoned here in the middle of a war, not knowing nothing about these language or customs. No wife, no kids, just me!”

Why was this happening? Youko desperately searched for an answer. No matter how she thought about it, there was no clue in anything she had heard up to now that explained it.

“Out of the frying pan, into the fire, that was me. We made all the sacrifices during the war and you got to live the easy life! Why is that?”

“I don’t know!” Youko shouted back.

A voice asked from the hallway outside the door, “Is there something wrong?”

The old man hurriedly put his finger up to his lips. Youko turned towards the door and said, “I’m sorry, it’s nothing.”

“There’s people here trying to sleep.”

“I’ll be more quiet after this.”

From the other side the door, the sound of footsteps trailed away. Youko sighed. The old man looked at Youko with an amazed expression on his face.

“You understood what he said?”

The language they were speaking, he meant. Youko nodded. “I understood it.”

“You was speaking our language!”

“Whose language was I speaking?”

“You was speaking Japanese!”

“But, the man I was speaking to, he understood me.”

“So it seems.”

Youko had spoken the same language she always spoke, she had heard the same words she always heard. What could account for this strange phenomenon?

The old man’s expression softened somewhat. “Fact remains, you’re no *kaikyaku*. Not in the slightest. You not just some ordinary *kaikyaku*, that’s for sure.”

The way he said *kaikyaku*, it wasn’t just the intonation he used. Now that Youko had become accustomed to his voice, the way he pronounced the words was a bit different as well.

“How is it that you can understand them words?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t know, huh?”

“Honestly, I haven’t got the slightest idea. I don’t know why I came here in the first place, or why we’re different from each other.”

And why had her appearance changed? As she asked herself this question she touched her dyed hair, now hard to the touch. She said, “How are we ever going to get back?”

“I been searching for the same thing. All they say is, can’t. That’s the only answer.”

He gave Youko a dispirited look. “If there was some way to go back, I would’ve done it a long time ago. Now, even if I did get back somehow, I’d be like old Rip Van Winkle^[8]. So . . . miss, where you are headed?”

“No place in particular. Can I ask you something?”

“What’s that?”

“Did you get arrested when you came here?”

“Arrested?”

Seizou gave her a wide-eyed look, and then a thoughtful expression. “That’s right. They arrest *kaikyaku* here. Nope, not me. I washed ashore in Kei.”

“What? What difference does that make?”

“It’s because different kingdoms treat kaikyaku different. I arrived in Kei and got my papers there. Lived there until last year. Then the empress died and the whole place went to hell. Living there got to be impossible. So I got out and came here.”

Youko recalled the refugees she had seen in the city. “So . . . you can live in Kei without anybody arresting you?”

Seizou nodded. “True enough. But you can’t live there now. There’s a civil war going on. The whole place is a mess. The town I was living in got attacked by youma and half the people got killed.”

“Killed by youma? Not because of the war?”

“When a kingdom goes to hell in a handbasket, that’s when the youma show up. Not just youma. There’s droughts and floods and earthquakes, too. Nothing but bad things happen. So I left in a hurry.”

Youko turned away. So she could live in Kei without people chasing her all the time. Stay a fugitive in Kou or risk her life in Kei—which would be the safer course? She was pondering this dilemma when Seizou interrupted her.

“The women all left a long time ago. Who knows what the empress was thinking but she drove ’em all out of there.”

“You’re kidding.”

“It’s the truth. This rumor started going around that any women left in Gyouten—that’s the capital city—would get executed. Not a good place to be anymore. Most people got out while the getting was good. You don’t want to be anywhere near that place. It’s a hornet’s nest of youma. At one time lots of people was trying to leave but that’s died down recently. They been closing down the borders.”

“So that’s the way it is,” Youko muttered.

Seizou snorted derisively. “I don’t know a thing about Japan without asking, but I go on telling you about what goes on here. Looks like I’m becoming one of them, after all.”

“You surely don’t mean that.”

Seizou held up his hand. “Compared to Kei, Kou is a much better place. But let on that you’re kaikyaku and they slap you in irons. Better or no, not much a man can do in either case.”

“But I . . .”

Seizou laughed. When he laughed it almost sounded like he was weeping. “I know, I know. It’s not your fault. I know. But it still stings. No need to take it out on you. Stay on the lam, that’s got to be tough, too.”

Youko only shook her head.

“I got to get back to my job. Breakfast to get ready. You take care, wherever you’re going, okay?”

With that he slipped out of the room and was gone.

Youko was about to call him back but stopped herself. “Goodnight,” was all she said.

Chapter 28

[4-4] Youko pulled the futons down from the shelf. With a sigh she resigned herself to making her bed there. It'd been a long time since she'd slept on a futon and she was still wide awake. So many things weighed on her mind.

Why didn't the language confuse her? If she hadn't been able to comprehend what people were saying, she couldn't imagine how things might have turned out. She couldn't begin to imagine why things had turned out the way they had.

If the *lingua franca* spoken here wasn't Japanese, there was no way she should be able to understand anything. When she spoke to that person outside the door, what possible language could she have been using? The old man heard Japanese and the other person heard his own language.

The few words that the old man could speak in the language sounded only slightly different to her ears. Even that was a curious thing. And then saying that there was no such word as "governor." If that was the case, then what had she been hearing every time someone said the word?

Youko stared up at the low ceiling. *A translation.* The words were somehow being translated so she could understand them.

"Jouyuu? Is this your doing?"

Naturally, in response to her murmured words, she felt nothing at all.

As she always did, Youko slept with the sword clasped to her chest. When she awoke, the rucksack she had deposited in the corner of the room the night before had disappeared. Youko jumped to her feet and examined the door. The lock was fastened soundly.

She caught up with the manager and explained what had happened. The door and room were examined by two men who both regarded Youko with suspicious looks.

"Are you sure you really had your luggage here?"

"It was. My purse was inside it. Somebody stole it."

“Yeah, but the door was locked.”

“What about a master key?”

The men again exchanged suspicious expressions. “You trying to say that one of us stole your stuff?”

“We couldn’t do it if we wanted to. Or were you intending to blame us and run out on the bill all along?”

The men sidled up to Youko. She put her hand on the hilt of the sword. “Not true.”

“At any rate, you still owe us.”

“I told you, my purse was stolen, too.”

“Let’s take it up with the constable, then.”

“Wait a minute.” Youko started to undo the covering of her sword. She said, “Call that old man who was here last night.” It occurred to her that he could put in a good word for her.

“Old man?”

“From Kei. His name is Matsuyama.”

The two men exchanged glances. “What do you want with him?”

“Ask him. He saw my rucksack.”

One of the men stood guard at the front door and gestured with his chin to his younger companion, who ran off down the hall. He said to Youko, “What’ve you got there in your left hand?”

“Nothing with any money in it.”

“Maybe that’s for me to decide.”

“After we talk to the old man.”

The man glared at Youko, taking her curt reply to mean she was hiding something. Soon came the sound of pounding footsteps and the young man returned.

“He’s not here.”

“Not here?”

“His stuff’s not here. Looks like he took off.”

The man blocking the doorway stood there clucking his tongue. The sound made Youko’s blood boil. *It was him*. That old man did it. She closed her eyes. Despite them both being kaikyaku he had betrayed her.

Maybe he couldn’t forgive the fact that she had grown up knowing only the good life after the war, or that she could understand the language while he couldn’t. Or rather, that robbing her had been his intent all along. She thought she had found herself a kindred spirit. He’d led her to believe that as well. After being tricked by Takki she didn’t have the courage to trust any of these people. She’d let herself be fooled by a kaikyaku like herself.

Painful emotions rose in her throat, anger that called up visions of storm-wracked seas. When that happened she knew she was about to turn into a monster. Buffeted by these waves, she spat out, “*He stole it.*”

The younger man said, “He was just a tramp. He got tired of working here.”

“Stop making excuses and hand that thing over. I’ll decide whether it’s worth anything or not.”

Youko grasped the sword. “I am the injured party here.”

“And we’ve got a business to run. We can’t let people stay here for free.”

“Then you should run your business better.”

“Shut up and hand it over.”

The two men closed on her. Youko set herself into a defensive position, and with a flick of her wrist unraveled the covering on the sword. A beam of sunlight spilling in through a small window glittered off the blade.

“What the hell . . . ”

“Get out of the way. I told you, I am the injured party here.”

The younger man yelped and ran off. The man left behind wavered back and forth, clearly flustered.

“Move it. If it’s money you want, chase after that old man.”

“This is what you had planned all along!”

“I already told you what happened. You catch the old man and the money in the rucksack is yours.”

She thrust the sword out in front of her. The man retreated. She advanced three more steps. The man hurriedly turned and fled. Youko fainted as if giving chase, and then ran away.

Summoned by the other man, a posse of men came running, swords drawn. They poured out of the inn and pushed their way through the crowds. Youko noticed that her arm ached badly, the same place where the old man had tightly held her arm the night before.

She wasn't going to trust anybody ever again, this she promised herself.

Chapter 29

[4-5] **A**fter that Youko went back to camping outdoors.

For no particular reason, she followed the road to the next town. Having no money, she couldn't rent a room or buy a meal. She would have preferred to sleep next to the castle walls like the refugees, but the guards at the gate looked alert and trying to mingle in with the crowds would be a pain. She gave up on the idea.

Nobody will be your ally. No one will help you. There's not a person here who will let you get away with a damn thing.

Anyway, when she thought about being tricked and being betrayed, she told herself she'd rather sleep under the stars and chase the youma away with the sword.

With her new clothes, instead of being recognized as a teenaged girl, she was taken more often for a younger boy. There wasn't much law and order out here. She often tangled with shady-looking types but had lost any reluctance when it came to using the sword to threaten and intimidate.

During the day she walked while keeping a sharp eye on passers-by. During the night she walked while fighting the youma. She couldn't sleep at night without risking an attack, so she became a nocturnal animal, keeping on her toes at night and sleeping during the day.

There were families that sold food from huts along the road. But they only did business during the daytime, and, at any rate, Youko didn't have any money, so her meals pretty much tapered off to nothing.

When the hunger got too much to bear, she checked her indignation and looked for work. But with refugees flooding the towns, there was no work to be had. She certainly couldn't expect to be hired when she looked for all the world like a destitute child.

The youma showed up every night, and just to make things that much worse, sometimes during the day. On top of everything else, the visions she saw in the

sword and the tormenting blue monkey.

Watching her mother cry was heartbreaking. Youko couldn't shake the tempting thought that her life would much better if that monkey was dead. Nevertheless, the desire to see her mother, to see the place where she used to live, always won out. Just as the desire to talk to somebody, anybody always prevailed.

The sword's visions visited her at night, responding to her longing to go home. Whether the sword's extraordinary powers only showed themselves at night, or whether it was simply because that's when she was more often awake, Youko didn't know.

On the nights that the youma's relentless attacks didn't give her time to think about home, those nights left her body sore. The nights she did have time, those nights left her heart aching. She knew she ought to avert her eyes when the sword started to glow but lacked the resolve to do so.

On this night as well, the phosphorescent light was gathering above the blade. She'd fled from the youma, forged her way into the mountains, and was resting against a white tree.

She'd seen the white trees here and there in the mountains, unlike any trees she'd seen before. The bark was pure white and the branches reached as wide as a house, though not as high. She didn't think the uppermost branches were more than six or seven feet off the ground.

The leafless branches hung low to the ground, slender but so incredibly hard that not even the sword could cut through them, like the branches were made from white metal. Yellow fruit was ripening on the branches, but it too held as firmly as if welded on.

The white trees glowed even in the darkness, all the more so when the moon was out. Youko found them quite pleasing to look at.

Despite the low-hanging branches, when she slipped through and crawled up next to the trunk, there was enough space to sit down. For some reason, youma attacked less frequently when she was beneath these white trees. The wild dogs hardly bothered her at all. So when she needed to take a break, the trees were her first resort.

Concealed under the tree, leaning back against the trunk, Youko looked at the sword. Ten days had passed since meeting that old man in Takkyuu, the other kaikyaku.

The sword cast off a faint light, the illuminated branches of the tree sparkled brightly. The fruit of the tree glowed in golden hues.

Instead of seeing her mother as usual, a number of people appeared, moving about. A group of young women, wearing black uniforms, in a room filled with rows of desks.

My classroom.

The girls were just hanging around, the kind of between-classes scene Youko was well used to. Seeing their beautiful blow-dried hair, their pressed outfits, clean, white skin and comparing them to her present condition made Youko laugh out loud.

“Youko Nakajima? I heard she ran away.”

Her friend’s familiar-sounding voice got the ball rolling. All at once a storm of lively chatter rained down on Youko’s ears.

“Ran away from home? You’re kidding!”

“It’s the truth! She wasn’t sick yesterday. She ran away. Last night I got a call from her mother. I was totally surprised!”

This must be from some time ago.

“I can’t believe it!”

“And she was class president!”

“Yeah, with those serious types, you never know what they’re up to when nobody’s looking.”

“That’s for sure.”

Youko had to laugh again. Her reality was so different from what they could imagine.

“Like there was this weird guy who showed up and took off with her. I heard he was a real gangbanger type.”

“A guy? You think they were doing it?”

“Yeah, you think they eloped?”

“I heard that, too. You know how all the windows in the principal’s office got broken? It was her boyfriend who did it.”

“Serious?”

“Hey, this guy, what was he like?”

“I don’t really know. But he had this long, bleached hair that gave off a real creepy vibe.”

“I never would have figured that Nakajima was into the metal scene.”

“Or something like that.”

Keiki . . .

Youko hovered there like a ghost, unable to move as she watched the commotion play out before her.

“Like, everybody knows she dyed her hair.”

“Didn’t she say it was her natural color?”

“There’s no way! I mean, nobody’s hair naturally turns that color.”

“But I heard she left her backpack and coat in the classroom.”

“Yeah, what was that about?”

“It was yesterday morning, somebody said that Moritsuka found them.”

“But she ran off with that guy, didn’t she? And with just the clothes on her back!”

“Don’t be stupid. But if she *didn’t* run away, then that means she just up and disappeared.”

“Scary . . .”

“Sooner or later, we’re going to see those posters up at the train station.”

“Stuff on billboards, her mom walking around handing out flyers.”

“Like, have you seen this girl? That kind of thing.”

“Hey, you guys are getting way carried away with this.”

“Yeah, it’s got nothing to do with us.”

“She ran away from home, that’s all.”

“That’s right. It’s only when it happens to an honor student that everybody gets bent out of shape.”

“She took off with her boyfriend. Nobody wants to admit it, but when a girl falls for a guy like that, nothing she does is going to make any sense at all.”

“That’s harsh. You were friends with her, weren’t you?”

“I never did much more than talk to her. To tell the truth, I didn’t like her that much.”

“I know. It was always like she was better than the rest of us.”

“Definitely.”

“I heard her parents were super strict, always on about how she was supposed to be a *young lady*.”

“That’s what I’m saying. But it sure was useful, her always getting her homework done on time.”

“True, true. Fact is, I haven’t even touched today’s math assignment.”

“Hey, me, neither”

“Didn’t anybody?”

“Nobody besides Nakajima.”

“Youko, come back, please!”

Bright laughter gushed forth. At once the fraternal scene before her blurred, grew dim. The images bent and distorted, the figures dissolved away. Then in a twinkle vanished. The light went out and all that was left was the blade of the sword.

Chapter 30

[4-6] Youko lowered the sword, now painfully heavy in her hand. She'd known all along, known deep in her heart, that those she called her friends were not her friends at all.

For a brief moment of their lives they had been stuck together, shut up cheek by jowl in a little cage. Next year they would end up in different homerooms and forget about each other. After they graduated they would probably never meet again.

Even so, the tears welled up.

She knew these relationships were temporary at best. Yet, and perhaps all the more so, she had hoped to discover some greater truth hidden inside. She wished she could fly back to that classroom and plead her case before them. How would they respond then, she wondered.

They were living far from here in a peaceful country, young women who undoubtedly believed they experienced much misery and woe in their lives. Once upon a time, the same had been true of her.

The thought made Youko laugh so hard she ended up rolling around on the ground clutching her stomach. Curled up like that in a fetal position, it struck her that she was alone, truly alone, totally cut off from the rest of the world.

When she fought with her parents, when she had a falling out with her friends, or when she simply felt down for a spell and told herself how lonely she was, hadn't that been little more than an indulgence? She had a home to go home to, people who would not turn against her at the drop of a hat, who would console her. And if all that went away she could make more friends soon enough, even if they were only fair-weather friends.

Just then she heard the sound of a voice that, as many times as she'd heard it, she still could not stand. Curled up on the ground she grimaced.

"You can't go back, I keep telling you."

"I don't want to hear it."

“But as long as you are thinking about it, shall we consider the substance of your hypothetical? Even supposing you could go back, nobody would be waiting for you. You simply are not a person worth waiting for.”

In some way, the monkey’s appearances were connected to the visions she saw in the sword. The blue monkey always showed up immediately after she saw a vision. It never did her any physical harm. It’s just that he never said anything she wanted to hear, and in that grating tone of voice. Moreover, Jouyuu did not react to him in the slightest.

“My mother is!”

There came to her mind the image from another vision of her mother petting the stuffed doll. Even if she could not call her friends real friends, she could count on her mother to stand by her. A sudden welling up of homesickness made her chest hurt.

“My mom was crying for me. That’s why, someday, I know I’m going home.”

The monkey laughed all the harder. “But of course. She’s your mother, after all. It’s always so sad for a parent to lose a child.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Youko raised her head above the underbrush. There was the monkey’s head, bathed in blue light, close enough to touch with her outstretched arm.

“Oh, she’s not sad because *you* have gone missing, little girl. She’s sad because *her child* is gone. Her sorrow amounts to nothing more than that. Can you not even understand this much?”

It was like getting hit in the stomach. Youko couldn’t think of how to respond.

“If, for example, the child in question were not you—were perhaps the black sheep of the family—she would react the same. That is the kind of creatures mothers are.”

“Enough.”

“Oh, now don’t you go giving me those angry looks. I tell you nothing but the truth and nothing but the truth.” The monkey howled, laughter that resounded brightly in ear-piercing shrieks. “It’s the same as any domesticated animal. You

raise the creature and it gets attached to you, now, doesn't it?"

"Shut up!" Youko sprang to her feet, brandishing the sword.

"Oh, I'm scared, I'm scared." The monkey went on laughing. "You miss your parents, don't you? Even parents like yours."

"I'm not listening."

"I understand, little girl. There's no place like home, there's no place like home. Not that you're absolutely *dying* to see your parents again. What you want to go back to is a warm house and your playmates."

"What are you trying to say?"

The monkey giggled cheerfully. "No worries about being betrayed by your parents, right? Are you sure? But aren't you really nothing more than a pet?"

"Your point is?"

"That you, pet, are no different than a dog or cat. All goes swimmingly as long as you are gentle and affectionate. But bite the master's hand or chew up the furniture, then what? They won't beat you because they have reputations to protect. And yet, were society to look the other way, there'd be no end to the number of parents who'd like to strangle the little tykes."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Perhaps it is." The monkey looked teasingly at her, playful eyes wide. "Parents do think so well of themselves for doting on their children. No, by gosh, I've got that wrong. It's how well they *play* the part of the loving parent, that's what they love about themselves the most."

The monkey's spirited screeches hurt her ears.

"You . . ."

"True of you, too, eh?"

Youko stopped with her hand on the hilt of the sword.

"Playing the good child was fun, no? Because then you could take everything your parents said as right, right? Yet you still had that feeling you'd be punished if you disobeyed, which makes you no better than the dog who curries his

master's favor, no?"

Youko bit her lip. She never worried about getting physically punished. But getting yelled at, or coming home to that heavy, brooding atmosphere, or not being allowed to buy something she wanted, or the imposition of other penalties—those were the things that weighed her down, that without her really knowing it made her continuously attentive to her parents' moods.

"It's not true that you were the good child. Not a good child at all. You were scared of rejection so you made yourself a *convenient* child for your parents to have around."

"And your *good* parents—well, that is a lie as well. Not good parents at all, always looking over their shoulders, afraid of what people might be saying behind their backs. You think that liars who flock together never betray each other? Oh, you will betray your parents. And your parents will certainly betray you. It is the way of all flesh. We tell each other our lies and the betrayed betrays the betrayer."

"You son of a bitch."

The monkey shrieked hilariously. "Oh, what a fine tongue you have on you. Yes, yes, I am a son of a bitch, but an honest son of a bitch. I never lie. I alone will never betray you. It is most unfortunate that I must be the one to teach you this lesson."

"Shut the hell up!"

"No, no, you can't go home. You'd be better off dead. But if you haven't the courage to die, you had better find yourself a better way to live."

The monkey eyed Youko's raised sword. "Another truth I shall tell you. You have no allies. Nothing but enemies. Even Keiki is your enemy. Your stomach is empty? You wish a better life for yourself? He won't help you. Instead, why not use that thing to shake a few people down?"

"Be quiet!"

"Hither and thither, everywhere you look, nothing but dirty moneygrubbers. Extort yourself a little cash. *That* is the way to a better life."

Youko swung the sword in the direction of the ear-piercing screeches. But there was nothing there. Only the loud laughter fading away into the dark night.

She tore at the ground, her hands bent into crooked claws, tears raining down between her fingers.

Chapter 31

[4-7] Youko wandered the backroads. She lost track of how many days had passed since leaving Takkyuu, or for that matter, how long it'd been since she left home. She had no idea where she was or where she was going and by this point she didn't care.

When the night came she drew the sword and stood her ground. When the enemy came they fought. When the morning came she found a place to make her bed and slept. And so her life went on.

Gripping the jewel and using the sword as a cane became natural to her. If there were no enemies about, she sat down. When they attacked at longer intervals, she dragged herself along. If there were no people around, instead of talking she moaned and groaned constantly.

Her hunger became attached to her thoughts. It became part of her consciousness. When starvation threatened, she flayed the dead body of a youma. It had a strange smell and she could not even hold the meat in her mouth. Occasionally she brought down a wild animal. She tried to eat it but her body could no longer handle solid food.

She struggled through countless nights to meet the dawn.

Leaving the road to forge deeper into the mountains, she tripped over a tree root and tumbled down a long slope. Casting care aside, she slept where she fell. She did not even bother to scout out her surroundings first.

She slept without dreams. When she awoke, she found she could not stand, no matter how hard she tried. She was in a shaded hollow within a sparse copse of trees. The sun was already setting and night was falling. If she stayed here like this, if she could not get up and move, she would become a youma's next meal. Even against impossible odds, Jouyuu could hold off one or two attacks. Beyond that, her body would become a useless tool.

Youko dug her fingers into the earth. No matter what, she had to get back to the road.

If she couldn't get back to the road and find somebody to help her, she would die here. She raised her head and searched for the jewel. But even gripping the jewel with all her might, she could not drive the sword into the ground to leverage herself up.

"No one's coming to help," an unexpected voice said.

Youko turned her head. This was the first time she had heard him during the daytime.

"You might as well make yourself comfortable right here, no?"

All Youko could focus on was the monkey's fur, shimmering like blown powder. All she could think was, why was he showing up now?

"Even if you do manage to crawl back to the road, you'll probably end up getting arrested. Though if you asked for help, they might give it. They might be the type who'd put you out of your misery, just like that."

That's undoubtedly what will happen, she thought as well.

She wouldn't ask for help from anybody. Now when her need was the most pressing was when she should expect help the least. Even if she got back to the road, there would be no help forthcoming. If somebody passed by her, they'd look the other way. A filthy vagrant would provoke nothing more than a grimace.

On the other hand, maybe she'd only get mugged. But a thief would figure out pretty quick she didn't have anything worth stealing and take the sword. Perhaps he would be kind enough to finish her off there and then. That was the kind of a place this world was.

Then all at once a new thought occurred to her. The monkey fed off her hopelessness and despair. Like some kind of emotional vampire^[9], he exposed all the anxieties and insecurities hidden in her heart and used them to crush her spirits.

Youko giggled. It felt good unraveling this small puzzle. She rolled over, gathered strength into arms and pushed herself into a sitting position.

"Now, wouldn't it be easier if you threw in the towel?"

"Oh, shut up."

“Why not take it easy?”

“Shut it.”

Youko drove the sword into the ground. Her strained knee almost gave out. She screamed, grabbed hold of the hilt of the sword, caught herself. She almost stood but lost her balance. Her body was too heavy to move like this. It'd be better to crawl along the ground, like an animal newly born.

“You want to live that badly, do you? And what will living get you?”

“Home.”

“Oh, why torment yourself so? No matter how much you hold on to life now, you can't go back.”

“I'm going home.”

“You cannot go home. There is no way to cross the Kyokai. Here, in this country, you will be betrayed and you will die.”

“You're lying.”

She would trust only the sword. Youko gripped the hilt and focused on the strength in her hands. Depend on no one, trust no one. Only the sword would protect her.

And then?

Keiki had brought her here. He never said anything about *not* going home. Finding Keiki was probably the only way. Right now, that was all she could hope for.

“Didn't I tell you that Keiki was your enemy?”

I'm not going to think about it.

“Do you really think he will help you?”

Either way.

Whether friend or foe, finding Keiki and finding out for herself was preferable to wandering around like this without a clue. When she met him, she would ask him why he brought her here, ask him how she could get back. She'd get the whole story out of him.

“Supposing you do go home, then what? Eh? You think then you’ll live happily ever after?”

“Be quiet.”

She knew what he was saying. She couldn’t forget the nightmares she’d had about this place. She couldn’t pretend that nothing had happened and go back to the way things were before. There were no guarantees about her appearance either. And if not, then the Youko Nakajima that used to be was gone forever.

“What a miserable creature, what an everlasting fool you are, little girl.”

The monkey’s bright, loud laughter ringing in her ears, Youko roused herself once more. She didn’t really understand why she was doing it. She was miserable, she was a fool. Nonetheless, if this was enough to make her give up, then she should have given up a long time ago.

Youko considered the current state of her body. She was covered with wounds, caked with blood and mud, her clothing reduced to reeking rags. But she didn’t give a damn about her appearance. Throwing away her life was no longer such a simple proposition. If she was indeed better off dead, then she should have died on the roof of the school when the kochou first attacked her.

It wasn’t because she didn’t want to die. It probably wasn’t because she wanted that badly to live. It simply was because she did not want to *give up*.

She was going home. Without a doubt, she would return to the place she so deeply longed for. As for what awaited her there, she’d cross that bridge then. Because going home meant staying alive, she would protect herself. She wasn’t about to die in a place like this.

Youko clung to the sword and pulled herself to her feet. She thrust the sword again into the rising slope and began climbing the brush-covered hill. No hill she had ever known had been so excruciating, covering so short a distance so slowly. Numerous times her feet slipped out from under her. She urged on her battered self, focused on the objective above her. She reached the end of the gauntlet, grasping the shoulder of the road with her outstretched hands.

She dug in her fingers and crawled up to the surface of the road. With a groan she pulled her body onto the mountain road and fell prostrate on level ground.

At the same time she heard a faint sound. The sound came from the far side of the road. A bitter smile came unbidden to her lips.

Oh, perfect.

Youko hated this world with all her heart. Approaching the road was a sound like the wail of a crying baby.

Chapter 32

[4-8] The pack of dog beasts came at her in a rush, the same ones that had attacked her before on the mountain road. Swinging the heavy sword, she dispatched most of them and was soon drenched with blood.

A dog beast leapt at her. She decapitated it. Suddenly she found herself down on one knee, a deep bite wound in her left calf. She felt no pain, as if the limb were numbed, though from the ankle down the pain was intense. She glanced at her blood-soaked leg then surveyed the road for any lingering foes. One dog remained.

This dog beast was bigger than all the rest she had felled. The difference in its physical strength was obvious as well. She'd delivered two solid blows to it already and it hardly looked winded.

The beast crouched low against the ground. She sized up their positions and corrected the grip on the sword. The weapon had almost become an extension of her own body, yet it was so heavy she could barely keep the tip on target. She felt a dizziness verging on vertigo. Her consciousness began to cloud over.

She swung the sword at the shadow that bounded toward her. The blade did not so much cut as it slapped against the dog's hide. Taking everything Jouyuu had to give she could not deliver a second blow.

The slap from the sword was enough to send the black beast sprawling. An instant later it was back on its feet, flinging itself towards her. She aimed at its snout and could do nothing more than thrust the sword forward.

The tip of the blade ripped through the beast's face. At the same time its claws tore into her shoulders. The shock of collision jarred the sword loose from her grasp. She managed to grab hold and with a shout turned on the fallen beast and swung down with all her strength.

Her energy exhausted, she stumbled forward, collapsed. Somehow the sword had pierced the beast's neck. The sword was staked into the ground through a patch of black fur. Dark blood spotted the earth around the end of the blade.

Youko could not move from where she had fallen. But neither could her foe. The two of them lay not more than a yard apart. They each raised their heads and guardedly examined the other's predicament.

Youko's sword was pinned to the earth. Her opponent exhaled foamy blood.

They exchanged brief glances. Youko moved first. She grasped the hilt of the sword with enfeebled hands and pulled herself to her feet.

A moment later her opponent roused itself and almost immediately collapsed.

Somehow she managed to yank the blade out of the ground. It weight like an anchor on her arm. She closed the distance between them, sank to her knees, and with both hands brought the sword down.

Her foe lifted its head and howled, gushing foamy blood. Its paws clawed weakly at the ground. It could not right itself. Holding the sword up with both arms, she aimed for the beast's neck, letting the weight of the sword by itself do the damage. The blade, shiny with blood and fat, sank into the fur. The beast's claws sprang out, its limbs convulsed.

It spewed more frothy blood, almost seemed to mutter something to itself.

With every ounce of strength she had left, she raised the heavy sword and let it fall. This time the beast did not even twitch.

The sword embedded itself halfway through the creature's neck. Youko let go of the hilt, rolled over on her back. Clouds hung low against the dome of the sky.

After lying there for a while staring up at the sky, she gulped air and screamed. Her side burned. Every breath tore at her throat. She felt nothing in her extremities, as if her arms and feet had been amputated.

She was grasping the jewel but could not even move her fingertips. Suppressing a sense of dizziness that verged on seasickness she watched the clouds roll by. A part of the sky was stained a faint madder red.

She was suddenly overcome by the urge to vomit. She turned her head to the side and threw up. The corrosive-smelling bile ran down her cheek. She took a breath but couldn't breathe. She gagged and choked, instinctively turned over and coughed violently.

I'm still alive. Somehow she was alive. As the hacking coughs wracked her body, this was the thought that turned over and over in her mind. When she at last brought her breathing under control, she heard a faint sound, the sound of footsteps.

No! Were her enemies still around? She lifted her head. Her vision spun, blackness closed in. Her head dropped back to the earth.

She couldn't get up. But within those brief moments, the image that swam into her reeling gaze embedded itself in her mind.

The color of gold.

Keiki! Still flat on her back she cried out, "Keiki!" *Of course it would be you, Keiki. You sent these youma.* "Why? Just tell me why!"

The footsteps were very close now. Youko raised her head. She caught sight first of a brilliantly colored kimono. Then the golden hair.

"Why . . . ?"

There was no reply to any of her questions.

Craning her head backwards, she realized it was not Keiki's face. "Oh," she said. Not Keiki. A woman. The woman peered down at her. Youko stared into her eyes. "Who are you?"

She was a woman with golden hair, maybe ten years older than Youko. On her slender shoulders perched a brightly-colored parrot. The woman's extraordinarily beautiful face was suffused with sadness. Staring up at her, Youko was struck by the realization that she was on the verge of weeping.

"Who are you?" Youko asked in a hoarse voice.

The woman looked at her and said nothing. Tears gathered in the her crystal clear eyes.

"What . . ."

The woman blinked slowly. Tears fell softly down her cheeks. She averted her eyes. Youko was too taken aback to speak. The woman turned her attention to the beast lying next to Youko. She gazed at it with a sorrowful expression, then slowly stepped forward. She knelt down next to the corpse.

Youko could do nothing but watch. No words came, she couldn't move her body. She had been trying all along to rouse herself but she couldn't move a finger.

The woman gently reached out and stroked the beast. The tips of her fingers brushed a patch of red. She jerked back her hand as if she had touched a red hot iron.

"Who are you?"

The woman didn't answer. She reached out again, grasped the hilt of the sword—the blade was still embedded in the beast's neck—pulled it free and set it on the ground. She eased the beast's head into her lap.

"Did you send them after me?"

The woman didn't speak. She cradled the beast in her lap, petted its coat. Her luxurious kimono was soon stained with clotted blood.

"And all the youma who've attacked me up to now? What do you have against me?"

Hugging the beast's head, the woman shook her head. Youko raised her eyebrows. The parrot perched on the woman's shoulder flapped its wings.

"KILL HER."

The shrill voice no doubt belonged to the parrot. Startled, Youko looked at it. The woman opened her eyes and glanced at the parrot as well.

"PUT AN END TO THIS."

The woman spoke for the first time. "I cannot."

"KILL HER. FINISH HER OFF."

The woman shook her head emphatically. "Please! That is the one thing I cannot do!"

"I AM GIVING YOU AN ORDER. KILL HER."

"I cannot!"

The parrot beat its wings and soared into the sky. It circled once and glided back to the earth. "TAKE THE SWORD."

“The sword is hers. It would be pointless.” There were echoes of pity and supplication in the woman’s voice.

“THEN CUT OFF HER ARM.” The parrot spoke in a loud, shrill voice. It flapped its wings vigorously. “I SHALL ASK THIS MUCH OF YOU: CUT OFF HER ARM SO SHE CANNOT HOLD THE SWORD.”

“I cannot. As I said, I cannot wield that sword.”

“THEN USE THIS ONE.”

The parrot opened its beak wide. Something glittered deep in its mouth behind its round tongue. Youko stared disbelievingly as the parrot coughed up the tip of a glossy black rod. Before her startled eyes, inch by inch, the bird continued to disgorge the full length of a Japanese-style sword in a black scabbard.

“TAKE IT.”

The woman’s face was white with despair. “Please, I beg of you.”

The parrot once more flapped its wings. “DO IT!”

As if struck physically, the woman covered her face with her hands. Youko pawed at the earth. She had to get up and get out of here. Yet the best she could do was rake the ground with her fingers.

The woman turned towards Youko, her face wet with tears.

“*Stop.*” Youko’s voice was so hoarse she could barely hear herself speak.

The woman reached down and seized the sword the parrot had disgorged. Her hands were soiled with the blood of the dog beast.

“Don’t do this. What kind of person are you?”

What kind of thing was that parrot? What kind of creatures were those beasts? Why was this happening to her?

The woman’s lips scarcely moved. *Forgive me*, Youko barely heard her say.

“Please . . . don’t.”

The woman aimed the tip of the sword at the spot on the ground where Youko’s right hand clawed the earth. As strange as it might seem, it was the woman who looked about ready to keel over, she was so gray.

Observing this, the parrot flew over and perched on Youko's arm. Its thick talons dug into her flesh. For some inexplicable reason, the bird was as heavy as a boulder. Youko wished to fling it off her arm but couldn't budge an inch.

The parrot cawed, "DO IT!"

The woman raised the sword.

"Please, no!"

Youko exercised every ounce of strength left in her, but she was too weak, the weight of the parrot riding her arm too heavy, and the woman drove the sword down faster than she could possibly move.

She felt nothing, only the shock of the impact.

Youko was not even sure she was still alive. Before shock could turn into pain, she lost consciousness.

Chapter 33

[4-9] The awful pain brought her back to life.

As soon as her eyes opened, she checked her arm. There was the sword that had stabbed her. At first she didn't understand what she was looking at. The sword stood erect, hilt pointing towards skyward.

Seconds later the pain brought her back to her senses. The sword pinned her right hand to the earth, the slender blade buried deeply through the palm. Throbbing pain radiated up her arm and into her head. Gently she tried moving her arm. The pain tearing through her hand made her scream.

Swallowing the dizziness and pain, taking care not to make the pain in her hand any worse, she sat herself up. With her trembling left hand she seized the hilt of the sword. She closed her eyes, clenched her teeth together, yanked out the sword. Pain convulsed her body.

She cast the sword aside, pressed her wounded hand to her chest, rolled on the ground over to where the beast had fallen. She didn't cry out. The intensity of the pain was enough to make her physically sick.

Writhing in agony, she grouped for the jewel and tore it free of the cord. She gritted her teeth and pressed the jewel hard against her hand. Groaning, her body twisted into a ball.

The magic of the jewel saved her. The pain abated a bit. After a few minutes more, holding her breath, she could bear to sit up again. She applied the jewel to the wound, cautiously tried to move her fingers, but couldn't feel anything below the wrist. She continued to force her right hand around the jewel.

Rocking back and forth, she hugged her hand against her body. She cracked open her eyes and looked up at the sky. The red-stained clouds were still there. She hadn't been unconscious that long.

Who was that woman? Why did she do this to her? So many things were racing through her mind, but she was in no condition to think about anything. After searching around some more, she found the sword. She took hold of the hilt and

hugged the sword and her right hand to her chest. For a while she stayed curled up that way.

Not a long time had passed when she heard a voice say, “Oh . . .”

She looked in the direction of the voice. A small child was standing there. The girl looked over her shoulder and yelled, “Mom!”

A woman hurried towards them at a small run.

Youko’s expression said that the child had not bothered her. Her mother seemed an honest type. Her appearance betrayed her low economic status. She carried a large pack on her back.

Similar looks of concern rose to the faces of mother and child as they ran toward her. They jumped over the bodies of the dead beasts, grimacing with distaste.

Youko couldn’t move. She could only watch helplessly from where she lay. *They’ll help me*, she thought, for only a moment, before more anxiety overcame her. This was one time when she really needed help. The worst of the pain had subsided, but had hardly disappeared. All her strength was exhausted. She doubted she could even get up a second time.

So she felt more suspicion than relief. It was all too good to be true.

“What’s going on? Are you all right?”

The girl touched Youko’s face with her small hand. Her mother put her arms around her and helped her sit up. For some reason, Youko found the body-warm touch of the woman’s clothing repulsive.

“What in the world happened to you? You were attacked by these beasts? Are you badly injured?”

As she spoke, the woman’s attention was drawn to Youko’s right hand. She let out a small cry. “What is this? Hold on.”

She searched in the sleeve of her kimono and extracted a strip of cloth the size of a hand towel. She used it to bind Youko’s hand. The girl took the small pack off her own back, took out a bamboo container, and held it out to Youko.

“Sir, you want some water?”

Youko hesitated. She couldn't shake her sense of unease. The canteen had been in the girl's pack so it must be for the girl's own use. There shouldn't be any poison in it. And the canteen didn't look like it had been tampered with in the meantime.

Having reassured herself, she nodded. The girl removed the stopper and with her two small hands held the canteen to Youko's lips. The lukewarm water flowed down her throat. In a stroke her breathing eased considerably.

The mother said, "You're probably hungry."

At the moment her stomach did not feel empty, but Youko knew she was starving so she nodded.

"When's the last time you had anything to eat?"

Youko couldn't be bothered to come up with a number so she remained silent.

"Mom, there's some fried bread."

"No, no, that'd be no good. It wouldn't stay down. What about something sweet?"

"Sure."

The child opened the mother's pack. Inside were a variety of jars of different sizes. With a stick she drew out the thick syrup. Youko had seen people carrying these kinds of containers before. They were probably syrup peddlers.

"Here you go."

Youko didn't hesitate this time. She took the stick with her left hand. The syrup melted sweetly in her mouth.

"Are you traveling somewhere? What happened to you?"

Youko didn't answer. She didn't want to tell the truth and it would be too tiring to think up a lie.

"I dare say, you seem well enough for being attacked by youma. Can you stand up? The sun will be setting soon. There's a village not far off, at the foot of the mountain. Can you walk that far?"

Youko shook her head. She meant to say that she didn't wish to go to the

village, but the woman took her to mean she could not move. She turned to the child and said, "Gyokuyou, run to the village and have someone come here. There's not much time. As fast as you can."

"Yes, Mom."

Youko sat up. "I'm okay." She said to the mother and child, "I thank you both very much."

She spoke brusquely, by way of turning down the offer. She managed to get to her feet and crossed the road to the steeply rising slope on the other side.

"Just a minute, where are you going?"

Youko didn't know herself. So she didn't answer.

"Wait. The sun is almost down. If you head into the mountains, you'll die for sure."

Youko slowly crossed the road. Her hand hurt with every step.

"Let's go to the village."

The grade here was quite precarious. Climbing the slope with only one hand, would take considerable effort.

"We're traveling merchants. We're going as far as Bakurou. You've nothing to fear from us. Let's go to the village, shall we?"

Youko caught hold of a root growing out of the roadbed.

"Wait, what's the hurry? Why aren't you taking your condition seriously?"

Youko glanced back over her shoulder. The woman stared at Youko, her eyes wide with bewilderment, like the child immobilized by her consternation.

"Please, let me be. If I do go with you to the village, what will be waiting for me there?"

"What has that to do with anything? The sun is setting! You're injured."

"Yes, indeed. You'd better hurry. You have a small child with you."

"Wait . . ."

"I'm used to it. Thank you for the sweets."

The woman looked at Youko in confusion. It was possible she was simply acting out of kindness. Or possibly not. Youko couldn't know for sure which.

She started once more to climb the slope. Below her the child called out. She held out both hands towards Youko. In one hand was the bamboo canteen, in the other a teacup filled to the brim with the syrup.

"Take these. It wasn't enough, what we gave you before."

Youko looked to the mother. "But . . ."

"It's okay. Well, then, Gyokuyou."

At her mother's urging, the child reached out and placed the cup and canteen at Youko's feet. She jumped down, ran back to where her mother was strapping on her pack.

Youko watched blankly as the child pulled on her own pack. She had no idea of how to respond. The mother and child glanced back at her many times as they descended the hill.

After they disappeared from view, Youko picked up the canteen and teacup. Her knee gave out and she sat down on the ground.

It's better this way.

She couldn't know for certain that they were acting out of the best of intentions. After arriving at the village, perhaps their attitude would have changed. Even if it didn't, once they found out Youko was a kaikyaku she'd be hauled off to the county seat. As painful as it might be, she had to take precautions. She couldn't trust anybody, couldn't expect anything. The minute she got careless and naive she'd paid for it the hard way.

"They just might have helped you, you know?"

Again, that intolerable voice. Youko answered without turning around. "It may have been a trap."

"Perhaps, but you won't see that kind of help again."

"It may have been no help at all."

"Considering the state of your body and hand, will you make it through the

night?”

“One way or another.”

“You better chase after them, no?”

“I’m fine here.”

“Little girl, you have gone and thrown away the first and last real chance you’ll ever get.”

“Shut up!”

Youko turned, sweeping wide with the sword. The monkey’s head was gone. Only its bright laughter remained, disappearing up the slope and into the underbrush.

Youko glanced back down the road. Dusk was falling. It began to rain, pebbling the road with small black spots.

Chapter 34

[4-10] That night was as bad as any night she'd been through. She was dead on her feet. The cold rain stole away her body heat. Naturally, a bad night for humans was a good night for youma.

Her clothing clung to her, restricting her movement. Her numb, lame limbs would not work the way she wanted. Some sensation had returned to her right hand, but barely enough. Holding the sword was extraordinarily difficult. To make things worse, the hilt became slippery in the rain. She had no idea how many foes there were in the surrounding darkness. And though the youma attacking her were on the small side, there were very many of them.

She was knee-deep in mud, covered with the blood of her victims and the blood flowing from her own wounds. As the rain washed away the blood and mud, it also washed away the last of her strength. The sword was heavy, Jouyuu's presence weak. The tip of the sword dipped lower and lower with every encounter.

Over and over she looked up at the sky in supplication, waiting for the dawn. The night had always passed quickly while she was fighting, but on this night in particular, her enemies coming at her in an endless torrent, it went on fearfully long. Over and over she dropped the sword and was covered in wounds before she could retrieve it. About the time when she finally saw the first signs of daybreak, she also saw the silhouette of one of the white trees.

Youko rolled under the branches of the tree. The hard trunk bruised her back. But that sense of being pursued ceased. Beneath the branches, as she collected her breath, she knew they were still out there, waiting. After a while they slipped away into the rain.

The sky brightened. Her enemies vanished. She began to make out the outlines of a surrounding grove of trees.

"I made it."

She took a deep breath. Raindrops fell into her mouth.

“I actually made it.”

She paid no mind to her throbbing, mud-grouted wounds. She lay down, caught her breath, looked up at the sky through the white branches of the tree and waited for the gray day to come. As her breathing steadied she became quite cold. The branches did not stop the rain. She needed to slip away from here and find shelter from the rain, but she didn't move.

She desperately clutched the jewel as if to store up more of the strange energy that warmed her fingertips. Exerting great effort, she rolled over and crawled out from under the tree and dragged her body towards the lower part of the slope. Crawling over the wet grass and ground was not difficult.

She had tried her best to stay to the road, but in the middle of the night, driven on by her foes, she couldn't begin to imagine how deeply into the mountains she had wandered.

Clinging to the jewel and to the sword, she stood up.

She was well aware of her injuries. She understood the nature of the severe pain she was feeling. Still, she could not say exactly *where* she hurt. With each step she braced herself to keep her knee from buckling.

Half-crawling, she descended the slope and came upon a narrow trail. It didn't look like the main road. She saw no ruts or wheel marks. It was hardly wide enough for a horse cart to pass. This was the end of the line. Sinking to her knees, she dug her fingers into the bark of a tree to support herself but her hands were of little use to her.

She had been headed towards the wrong road all along. And now she couldn't move another inch.

She held the jewel tightly in her hands. It brought forth no warmth or comfort. Whatever energy they could supply her with, more was washed away by the rain. The jewel had reached the limits of its miraculous powers.

So this is where I die, she thought, and laughed.

Among all her classmates, Youko alone would die the beggar's death. They belonged to a different world. They would always have homes to return to, families who would protect them, futures sure to be free of want or hunger.

She had done the best she could. This was it. She didn't want to give up, but no matter how she tried she couldn't raise a finger. She had endured to the end, and if an easy death were her reward, she supposed she could find some value in the struggle.

Mingled in with the sound of the rain there sounded a clear, high tone. She raised her eyes. The sword lying next to her cheek shone with a faint light. From where her head was resting on the ground, she couldn't see the blade itself, but she could observe the faint images rising up in the mist from the pounding rain.

"And Youko Nakajima?" a man's voice asked.

The vice-principal was sitting there. She couldn't make out where he was.

"Youko was a kind and diligent student. At least as far as her teachers are concerned, she was the most agreeable of all our students."

The vice-principal was speaking to somebody. She could hear the interlocutor's voice. It sounded like the voice of a big man.

"You ever hear anything about her getting messed up with the wrong crowd?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You wouldn't know?"

The vice-principal shrugged. "Youko was the model of a perfect student. There was never any reason to question what kind of life she was living or whether she ever strayed from the straight and narrow."

"A strange boy showed up at your school, isn't that right?"

"Yes. I don't think he was an acquaintance of hers. But the truth of the matter is, I just don't know. It always seemed like there were aspects of her character that were a closed book to the rest of us."

"A closed book?"

The vice-principal's answer was accompanied by a sullen expression. "That's not quite what I meant. Let me put it another way. Youko was an honor student. She was on good terms with her classmates as well as with her parents. Or so I've heard. But that's simply not possible."

“Not possible?”

“I may be out of line saying this, but teachers will see things in whatever light favors themselves. Friends do the same. Parents tell you what’s convenient for them to tell you. They all fashion their own image of the student and try to impose it on everybody else. Now, the opinions of these three parties are never going to agree. A student trying to meet all the expectations of her teachers and parents would find the effort intolerable. A good kid to you or me won’t be to somebody else. At the end of the day, by being all things to all people, Youko never got close to anybody. That might have been the most convenient way to live her life, but I suspect it never amounted to much more than a convenience.”

“And how about yourself?”

The vice-principal frowned. “I’m talking about your gut type of reaction, okay? But for most teachers, the few hard-to-handle students—the ones you keep your eye on—they’re the ones you find endearing, even memorable. I always thought Youko was a good student, but I’d probably forget all about her the day after graduation. At a ten-year reunion, I wouldn’t have the slightest idea who she was.”

“Of course.”

“Whether Youko acted this way on purpose, or whether it was the result of her simply trying to do the right thing, I don’t know. If it was done with deliberation, I can’t imagine what she was trying to hide. And if not, once she realized what she was doing, at some point it must have struck her as an empty way to live. Wondering what she was doing with her life, seeing it all as meaningless, I don’t think that would have been unusual at all for her to just want to disappear.”

Youko stared with amazement at the vice-principal. The image faded. In his place a girl appeared, a student, one of Youko’s closer friends.

“I’ve heard you were one of Ms. Nakajima’s best friends.”

The girl flashed him a severe look. “Not really. We were never really that close.”

“No?”

“Yeah. Sure, we talked now and then at school, but we never got together

outside of school, never talked on the phone. That was true for most of us. That was about as much as we ever got to know about a girl like her.”

“I see.”

“So, frankly, I really don’t know anything about her. I don’t have anything bad to say about her either.”

“Did you dislike her?”

“She wasn’t particularly unlikeable and she wasn’t all that likeable. I got the feeling that, no matter what, she would always try to say the *appropriate* thing, you know? She wasn’t interesting enough to actually dislike.”

“You don’t say.”

It was another girl who came right out and said she didn’t like her. “Youko, she was a little two-faced brownnoser.”

“Two-faced?”

“Yeah. Like, you know, sometimes you badmouth somebody? If she was there, she’d nod and say, like, yeah, me too. But when somebody else was badmouthing *us*, she’d do the same thing. Always kissing up to whoever she was with. That’s why I couldn’t stand her. There’s no way a person like her has real friends. She was fine to complain to, though. She’d go along with whatever you said. That’s about it.”

“Huh.”

“That’s why I think she ran away from home. She was probably messing with some gangbangers behind everybody’s back. I wouldn’t be surprised if it started with a lot of big talk about how dumb we all were and deciding to jerk us around. I could never figure out what was going on with her anyway.”

“Perhaps she got caught up in something she couldn’t handle.”

“Yeah, you know, like she got into a fight with the homies she was hanging with. Not that I would know anything about stuff like that.”

It was another girl who admitted to flat-out hating her. “To be honest, I don’t mind her being gone one bit.”

“You said your classmates teased you a lot?”

“Yeah.”

“And Ms. Nakajima went along with it?”

“Yeah. She always went along when they froze me out. But she was the one who always played innocent afterwards.”

“How’s that?”

“They were always giving me crap, you know? Youko never joined in like she really meant it. She always pretended that she was above it all. Fact was, she was a coward.”

“I see.”

“Like she was a better person than anybody else, like she felt sorry for me. But she wouldn’t do anything to stop it. That’s what pissed me off the most.”

“Understandable.”

“Whether she ran away or got kidnapped or whatever, I couldn’t care less. As far as I’m concerned, I was the victim and she was one of the perpetrators. I’m not going to sit here and act all sorry for her. I don’t want to be a hypocrite like her. I suppose that gives me a motive, huh? But I’m glad she’s gone. That’s the truth.”

She’s not that kind of person, her mother insisted. Her mother sat there with a distressed look on her face. “She was a good girl. She wouldn’t run away from home or get mixed up with such unsavory types.”

“Apparently she wasn’t completely happy at home.”

Her mother looked surprised. “Youko? Nothing of the sort.”

“Her classmates had much to say on the subject. *Her parents are really strict*. Things like that.”

“We did discipline her at times, but nothing more than what any parent would do. No, that has nothing to do with it. She had nothing to be dissatisfied with at home, not in the least.”

“You knew of no reason for her to run away from home?”

“None at all. She’d never do anything like that.”

“Are you familiar with this boy who came to see her at school?”

“No. She wouldn’t associate with such people.”

“Well, then, what do you think accounts for her disappearance?”

“Somebody kidnapped her on her way home from school.”

“Unfortunately, there’s no evidence for that. Youko left the principal’s office together with the boy. After that we believe they went somewhere else, also together. It doesn’t mean she wasn’t taken against her will. But several of the teachers said they appeared to be on intimate terms.”

Her mother hung her head.

“You say that your daughter didn’t have a boyfriend. Perhaps she was involved in some other type of relationship. A shared acquaintance, for example. Anything we could use to begin a search with . . .”

“Did they really say Youko wasn’t happy with the way things were at home?”

“So it seems.”

Her mother buried her face in her hands. “I never sensed that there was anything she was unhappy about. She’s not the kind of girl who would run away from home or make bad friends behind our backs. She’s not the kind of girl who’d get involved in things like that.”

“Teenagers don’t usually reveal their true selves to their parents.”

“Hearing about what goes on in other people’s homes, it does make me wonder what kind of a person Youko really is. When I think about it now, perhaps I should have looked harder at anything that struck me as unusual.”

“Indeed, children don’t always turn out in ways that are convenient for their parents. My own kid is quite the little brat.”

“Yes, I guess that must be it. She always showed us her good side. We dealt with her on the basis of outward appearances and ended up being deceived. Children will use their trust against you.”

No, Mom, it’s not true . . .

Youko wanted to weep but no tears would come. *It's not true*, she wanted to scream. Her mouth only formed the shape of the words. As with the silent click of a switch, the vision disappeared.

The ground around her was covered with puddles, her head half buried in the mud. She did not have the strength left to stand up. No one could have possibly imagined she would have ended up here, in this condition. Knowing nothing, that's how they could come to such convenient conclusions.

Adrift in this world, starving, wounded, not even able to sit up—and despite everything, her desire to go home had made it all possible to bear. But in truth, what she had seen in the visions were the only human relationships of any value she had back in her home country.

What did I think I was going home to?

No one was waiting for her. No one understood her. She had *nothing*. Whether she was *here* or whether she was *there*, she'd be deceived and betrayed just the same.

Yes, I get it now.

And still, she wanted to go home. She found it strangely funny. She wanted to roar with laughter but the cold rain left her face too numb. She wanted to cry but had no tears left in her.

Whatever.

Whatever happened, it was all good. Because very soon it would all go away.

Part V

Chapter 35

[5-1] Rain fell like slender threads scattered by the wind. Youko couldn't move, couldn't cry. She could only lie there listlessly with her cheek in a puddle.

She heard the swishing sound of something pushing through the undergrowth. She knew she should hide but could do little more than lift her head.

A villager or a beast or a youma. No matter what, the results wouldn't change. Whether she was arrested or attacked, or if she simply continued to lie there, her struggles would come to the same end.

She looked up through the mist in the direction of the sound. It was neither a villager nor one of her pursuers. It wasn't a person at all but a rather strange creature.

The creature resembled a rat. The way it stood up on its two hind legs and quivered its whiskers, there was a very definite rat-ness about it. Odder still, standing erect, this rat was as tall as a human child. It didn't look like a run-of-the-mill beast or youma. Youko lay there and stared vacantly at this curious rat.

The rat was sheltering itself from the rain with a large leaf it wore over its head like a bamboo hat. Silver rain drummed against translucent green. The pearl-colored raindrops were quite beautiful.

The rat stared back at Youko with a slightly stunned expression. It didn't seem to be getting ready to attack her. It was a bit plumper than a rat. Its fur was a color somewhere between a light brown and gray. Youko felt an urge to pet it. Raindrops decorated its fluffy coat like diamonds. The fur extended all the way down its tail, so though it looked like a rat, it probably wasn't the same species.

The rat twitched its whiskers several times, then toddled closer to Youko on its two hind legs. Leaning its gray-brown body over her, it touched her shoulder with a small forefoot.

"Are you all right?"

Youko blinked several times. She heard the sound of a child's voice. It was definitely coming from the rat. With a curious expression the rat politely bowed its head next to hers. "What's the matter? Can't you move?"

Youko looked up into the rat's eyes and just managed to shake her head. Perhaps because it wasn't a person she let her guard down a bit.

"Well." The rat reached out with its small, childlike forefoot. "Try your best. My house isn't far from here."

Ah— Youko sighed. Whether a sigh of relief for being rescued, or of disappointment for being rescued, she wasn't entirely sure.

"Okay?" the rat said.

She tried to grab its hand but could only move the tips of her fingers. The rat reached down and clasped Youko's cold hand in its small, warm forefoot.

Leaning on an arm stronger than she would have imagined, they made their way to a small house. That was the last thing she remembered.

Many times she had the sense of opening her eyes and taking in her surroundings but couldn't grasp what she was looking at or recall what she had seen. Her consciousness alternated between periods of deep sleep and light sleep. When at last she awoke for good, she found herself lying on a bed in a humble abode.

She stared blankly up at the ceiling, and a moment later quickly sat up. She jumped out of bed and collapsed on the floor. Her legs were useless appendages.

No one else was in the small room. Her vision still spinning, she desperately searched around the bed on her hands and knees. Except for a stand next to the bed fashioned from a few planks of wood, there wasn't much in the way of furniture. Neatly arranged on the makeshift table were the sword, shrouded in a bolt of cloth, and the blue jewel, threaded through with a new cord.

With a profound sense of relief she managed to stand up. She placed the jewel around her neck and returned to the bed with the sword. She slipped the sword under the quilt. Finally she could relax.

At this point Youko realized that she was wearing a nightdress. Her many

wounds had been treated. There was something damp under her shoulder. It was a wet, folded cloth. She had not noticed it when she jumped out of bed. She placed it back on her forehead. It felt good. She drew up the thick quilts, grasped the jewel, closed her eyes, and breathed a deep sigh of relief. Having been saved, she could begin to believe that her worthless existence still had value.

“Are you awake?”

She sat up again in a hurry. Looking back at the source of the voice, she saw the big gray-haired rat standing there. The door was open and it was coming into the room. In one hand it held a tray, in the other a pail.

Her sense of wariness reared up inside her. It lived like a person, talked like a person. Just because it looked like an animal didn't mean she could trust it.

Paying no attention to the wary looks Youko was giving it, the rat nonchalantly set the tray on the table, and the pail at the foot of the bed.

“How's your fever?”

It reached out with its small forefoot. Youko immediately shrank away. The rat twitched its whiskers and then picked up the damp cloth that had fallen onto the quilt. It must have noticed that Youko had the sword clasped tightly to her chest but said nothing. It placed the cloth in the bucket, looked at Youko's face.

“How are you feeling? Want something to eat?”

Youko shook her head. The rat gave its whiskers a twitch, took a cup from the table. “It's medicine. Will you take it?”

Youko again shook her head. She couldn't take any chances, couldn't expose herself to any possible threats. The rat thought about it for a moment, raised the cup to its mouth and, as she watched, drank a bit. “See, ordinary medicine. A bit bitter, but that's the only way to get it down.”

With that, it again offered it to her. Youko refused to take it. Confounded, the rat scratched the fur around its ear. “Well, then. What can I offer you? If you won't drink or eat anything, you won't get your strength back. How about some tea? Goat milk? Rice pudding?”

Youko refused to answer. The rat sighed to itself, as if trying to figure out what

to do next. "You've been asleep for three days. If it was in me to do something with that, I would have had all the time in the world."

The rat gestured with the tip of its nose at where Youko had the sword clasped to her chest. "You're even hiding that sword from me. Can't you trust me even that much?"

Youko looked into its small black eyes. Slowly she took out the cloth-shrouded sword and laid it across her lap.

"Now we're getting somewhere," the rat said in a pleased voice. It reached out again. This time Youko did not shrink away. With its tiny fingers it briefly touched her forehead. "You've still got a bit of a fever but it's gone down a good bit. Now, you settle down and rest. Is there anything I can get you?"

Youko said uncertainly, "Water . . ."

The rat's ear's flicked back and forth. "Water. Great. So you can speak! I'll bring some water straightaway. If you need to get up, keep yourself wrapped up in that quilt."

Not waiting for Youko to nod in reply, the rat darted out of the room. Its tail, covered in short fur, swayed back and forth as if to help keep its balance.

A few minutes later the rat returned carrying a pitcher, cup and small bowl. The almost hot water was delicious. She drained the cup over and over. Then she peered at the bowl, caught the scent of alcohol.

"What have you got there?"

"Peaches pickled in wine and simmered with sugar. Want to try one?"

Youko nodded. Then she turned to the rat and said, "Thank you."

The rat's whiskers quivered. The fur on its cheeks stood out, its eyes narrowed and it smiled, or so that was how its expression struck her.

"My name's Rakushun. And you are?"

The question stumped her at first. She simply answered, "Youko."

"Youko. And how is it spelled?"

"*You* as in *youki* (cheerful), and *ko* as in *kodomo* (child)."

“*Ko* as in child?” Rakushun tilted his head to the side. “Huh,” he said. “That’s a curious name. Where are you from?”

As it would be awkward to not answer now, Youko stalled as she wracked her brains. “Kei.”

“The Kingdom of Kei? Where in Kei?”

Not knowing anything more of Kei, she promptly answered, “Hairou.”

“Where is that?” Rakushun looked at her with an only slightly bewildered look, and then scratched at his ears. “Well, that’s neither here nor there. Let’s take your medicine and get you back to bed.”

Youko nodded. She asked, “How do you spell Rakushun?”

The rat laughed. “It’s *Raku* as in *kuraku* (sorrow and joy), and *shun* as in *shunbin* (quick-witted).”

Chapter 36

[5-2] Youko spent the rest of the day in the room sleeping. She'd come to the conclusion that Rakushun was the sole occupant of the house.

"It's got a tail. That can't be good, eh?" It was the middle of the night. The blue monkey's head sat at the foot of the bed. "One way or another he's bound to betray you, don't you suppose?"

Though there were two beds in the room, Rakushun didn't sleep there. She didn't think the house had another bedroom. She wasn't sure where he bedded down for the night.

"Isn't it about time you skedaddled out of here? If you don't, he's bound to steal your life away. No?"

Youko didn't answer. If she continued to lie there and listen, the blue monkey would just repeat itself over and over. These were her anxieties. The monkey appeared in order to reveal them to her. He fed her fears and then gobbled them down. She was sure that was the way it worked.

Youko turned on her side. The blue monkey smoothly slipped over the covers until its small head rested next to her pillow. He peered at her. "You've got to strike first, before something bad happens. If you don't, you'll never survive. Isn't that right, little girl?"

Youko rolled over and stared at the ceiling. "It doesn't mean that I trust him."

"Eh?"

"The way things are now, me not being able to move and all, I can't do anything about it. If I leave before being able to effectively use the sword, I'll just become some youma's next meal."

Not to mention that the wound to her right hand was severe. Even after a day of pressing the jewel against her hand, she hardly had sufficient strength in her hand to grip the sword.

"He's going to figure out soon enough that you're a kaikyaku, no? You really

think you should be taking it easy like this? Ah, the governor's men could be arriving any second."

"In that case, I'd let my sword do the talking. If four or five of them came at me, I'd get away with my head intact. But before that happens, I'll take advantage of the situation."

There's no one here I can call an ally.

But she really needed help now. Until she could properly wield the sword again. Until a bit more of her strength returned. Until then, she needed a safe bed, food and medicine. She didn't know if Rakushun was on her side or not, but at least he was providing what she desperately needed. Until she knew for certain, she would take advantage of the situation as things stood.

"He could be poisoning the food, no? How can you be sure that that medicine is really medicine?"

"I'm taking precautions."

"And I'm telling you that you'll be outsmarted."

The blue monkey was venting her doubts and fears. As she answered them one by one it resembled an exercise in self-examination.

"If he really had in mind to do something to me, he could have done what he wanted when I was unconscious. Even now, even if he wasn't poisoning the food, he would have had any number of chances to kill me."

"Perhaps he is waiting for something? Waiting for reinforcements, no?"

"In that case, I'll save what energy I've got until then."

"In the meantime, he's getting you to trust him. Then he'll turn the tables on you."

"In that case, until Rakushun shows his hand, I'll keep on pretending to trust him."

The monkey burst into bright laughter. "Look at you, growing a backbone all of a sudden!"

"I have figured a few things out."

Like the fact that she had no friends and no allies in this world. The fact that she had no place to go, no home to return to. The fact that she was completely on her own. Nevertheless, she had to stay alive. A life without friends, a life with no place to call her own—yes, it sucked being her. But if everyone in this world wanted her dead, then she wouldn't die. And if no one in her old world wanted her back, then she'd go back anyway.

She wasn't giving up. No way was she ever giving up. She was going to live. She was going to find Keiki. She was going home. It made no difference whether Keiki was friend or foe. If he was her enemy, if he threatened her, she'd make him take her back anyway.

"And what will you do when you get home?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

"Better to just cash in your chips right now, no?"

"If no one gives a crap about me, then at least I'll give a crap about myself."

"That rat's going to betray you."

Youko turned and looked at the monkey. "If I don't trust him, then he can't betray me."

It would have been better, of course, if she had figured this out earlier. She was a kaikyaku. That's why she was hunted. A kaikyaku could count on no one. There was no place a kaikyaku could call safe ground. If she'd understood even that much, she wouldn't have been duped by Takki and Matsuyama. She wouldn't have been so ready to trust and been so easily betrayed. When it came to staying alive, she would use the appearance of trust to get what she needed out of people. That was the better strategy to follow.

Take advantage of people who could be taken advantage of. Not the most ethical approach to life. Takki and Matsuyama had taken advantage of her to make themselves a little richer. She should have a few scruples, then, about using Rakushun to keep body and soul together.

"You're turning into quite the little scoundrel, now, aren't you?"

"Just doing what I have to do," Youko muttered. She waved her hand

dismissively. "I'm tired. Go away."

A strange look came over the monkey's face, an expression like a child stubbornly chomping down on a lemon. He turned his back to her and in a wink sunk down into the futon and disappeared.

Watching this, Youko laughed thinly. These were all the anxieties she didn't allow herself even to feel brought out in the open. It was proving a useful way to organize her thoughts, something she could take advantage of.

"Yes, I really am turning into quite the little scoundrel." She laughed softly to herself in self-derision.

Nevertheless, there was no way she'd allowed herself to be used by another person again. No way she'd willingly allow another person to harm her again. Come what may, she was going to protect herself.

"That's why it's got to be this way."

The mother and child she'd met on the mountain road, they hadn't betrayed her because she hadn't given them the chance to betray her.

I won't give Rakushun the chance.

And that is how she would stay alive.

But why had it been so necessary for her to come to this world? Why had Keiki called her *lord*? Who were her enemies? What were they after? Why were they after her? That woman—the one with the same golden hair as Keiki—who was she? Why had she done what she had done?

Youma are not the kind of creature to go chasing after one person in particular.

Then why were they attacking *her*? That woman had embraced the corpse of the black dog as if mourning its death. Maybe they were comrades in arms. She'd gathered youma around her the same way Keiki did. Except she sent hers after Youko. Still, it looked like the woman was being ordered to attack her. Who was giving the orders? Was it Keiki or somebody else related to her?

She was clueless. She couldn't afford to stay clueless. She had to find somebody with the answers. Unconsciously she clenched her hands into fists.

Her fingernails dug into her palms. Youko held up her hands and examined the tips of her fingers.

Her chipped and broken nails were like knives, like some creature's talons.

Only youma and wizards can cross the Kyokai.

Youko was neither a god nor a wizard.

That makes me a youma.

The dream of the red beast she'd had on the beach of the Kyokai—was it really a dream? Before coming to this world, for a long time she'd dreamt of being attacked by youma. That dream came true. Was her dream of becoming a youma also a premonition of things to come?

Her hair had turned red, her eyes emerald green. Were these the first steps in a total transformation? Perhaps that meant she wasn't a human being at all, but a youma. It struck her as a very frightening thought and at the same time a rather pleasant one.

She could shout, scream, wave her sword about, threaten complete strangers, and all with a strange, hidden sense of euphoria. In the world she was born into, she had not once dared to raise her voice or give another person a cross look. To do so had always seemed like a sin. But wasn't that because she had always known the truth? Wasn't this all the result of pretending to live a harmless life, when deep down in her subconscious she knew she was a youma, knew she was a ferocious beast, knew she could not have gone on living in that other world?

Perhaps that was why everybody had described her as an unknown quantity, a closed book.

With these thoughts crowding her mind, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 37

[5-3] The house was the kind of small, poor-looking structure common in the rural districts. Even compared to those, Youko knew this dwelling was of a particularly wretched class.

The dwellings located out among the fields were usually grouped together into a village. It was unusual to see a house all by itself like this. There didn't appear to be any other houses nearby on the mountainside.

Think of a rat's house and she would have imagined something tiny. Although the overall scale was small, it was more or less a normal-sized structure. Not just the building. Youko couldn't help but marvel that from the kitchen implements to the daily necessities, everything was in human dimensions.

"Rakushun, do you have parents?" Youko asked.

She was filling a big kettle on the stove with water. She'd finally been able to get up and give Rakushun a hand around the house. She steadied the pail with her right hand, still wrapped with bandages. Beneath the bandages the wound had almost healed.

Rakushun was restocking the stove with firewood. He looked up at her. "Don't have a father. My mom's out."

"Is she on a trip? She seems to be taking a long time. Has she gone far?"

"Not really. She went to the nearby village. She's got a job there. She was supposed to get back the day before yesterday."

Which meant that she would be getting back any day now. Youko made a mental note of this fact. "What does your mother do?"

"During the winter she works as a maid. She's called on for odd jobs during the summer as well. Otherwise, she's a tenant farmer."

"Oh."

"So, Youko, where are you headed?"

Youko turned the question over in her mind. She wasn't really headed anywhere

in particular. She didn't want to say she was just walking around. She said, "Have you ever heard of a guy named Keiki?"

Rakushun plucked a chip of wood out of his coat. "You're looking for somebody? Do you think he's from around here?"

"I don't know where he's from."

"Well, I'm sorry but I don't know anybody by the name of Keiki."

"Oh. Is there anything else you'd like me to do?"

"No, no, nothing else. You're still on the mend. You'd better sit down."

Youko lowered her tired body into the chair. The creaky old table and chairs sat on the bare earth floor of the small dining/kitchen area. The sword was on the chair next to her, wrapped in its shroud. She would not let it out of her sight for an instant. Rakushun had not taken her to task over it. She had no idea what his thoughts on the matter were.

"So, tell me, Youko," Rakushun said in his childlike voice, the sleek, glossy coat of his back to her, "why are you pretending to be a boy?"

He would have figured that out when he changed her into the nightdress. She said, "It's dangerous for a girl traveling alone."

"That makes sense."

He brought over an earthenware teapot. Whatever he had brewed filled the small room with a rich aroma. He set two teacups on the table, raised his eyes to hers. "I was wondering why you didn't you have a scabbard for that sword?"

"I lost it."

As she answered, even now, she could remember losing the scabbard. When they crossed the Kyokai, she had been told to never separate the sword and scabbard. Yet no disaster had followed directly from losing it. Obviously, the intent of the admonition had been to preserve the jewel.

Rakushun mumbled something to himself and climbed onto the chair. The way he moved rather resembled a rat mimicking a human baby. "If you don't get yourself a scabbard for that thing, a person could really hurt himself."

“Yeah, a person could,” Youko answered in a flat tone of voice.

Rakushun looked at her, his head tilted to the side. “You said you came from Hairou, right?”

“Yes.”

“Hairou isn’t in Kei. I believe Hairou is a village in the county of Shin, along the eastern coast.”

If he says so, Youko thought to herself blankly, that must be where it is. She said nothing.

“The place was thrown into quite a turmoil recently.”

Youko continued to hold her tongue.

“A kaikyaku washed ashore and ran away, something like that.”

Youko scowled at him. Without giving it conscious thought, she reached for the sword. “What are you getting at?”

“A redheaded girl of sixteen or seventeen, last seen carrying a sword without a scabbard. Should be considered armed and dangerous.” He paused and said, “You’ve dyed your hair, Youko.”

Her attention focused on Rakushun, she grasped the hilt of the sword. She couldn’t read the expression on his face. His countenance was too many degrees removed from the human.

“Well, at least that’s what the local magistrate has been saying.”

“The local magistrate . . .”

“Why the mortified expression? If I had intended to turn you in, I would have waited for the constables to show up. I hear there’s a big reward on your head.”

Youko unraveled the shroud from the sword. She stood and brandished the naked blade. “What do you want?”

The rat looked up at her with his jet-black eyes and quivered its silky whiskers. “You have quite the short temper.”

“Why did you take me in?”

“Why did I take you in? Well, when I come across some poor chap dying along the wayside, I can’t very well just leave him there. So I brought you home. Taking care of you obviously means *not* turning you over to the authorities, don’t you think?”

Youko couldn’t bring herself to believe him. Blindly trusting people like that was setting herself up for a fall.

“All kaikyaku get sent to the county seat. If they’re good, they’re confined under house arrest. If they’re bad, then it’s the axe. If you were to ask me, I’d say you belonged to the latter group.”

“Why do you think that?”

“The word is, you’ve got some kind of black magic up your sleeves. You commanded the youma to attack the convoy and used the opportunity to make a break for it.”

“I didn’t command the youma to do anything.”

“That’s what I thought.” The rat nodded to himself. “I didn’t think it’d be so easy to order youma around like that. In fact, I don’t think it was you commanding the youma. I think it was *you* the youma were hunting.”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“Well, either way, you must be a bad kaikyaku. Any person the youma would have it in for can’t be good.”

“And what if I am?”

“Nine times out of ten, when a kaikyaku ends up in front of the governor, that’s the last you hear of him. So naturally you’d run. But do you know where you should be running to?”

Youko had no answer.

“No, you have no idea at all. You simply stumbled into our little corner of the woods. Well, you should be headed for En.”

Youko gave Rakushun a long, hard look. There was no expression on the rat’s face. She couldn’t read him at all.

“Why?”

“I guess I just can’t stand idly by and watch people get killed.” Rakushun laughed. “That doesn’t mean I’d shed a tear seeing some brigand go to the gallows. But executing a kaikyaku just because she’s a kaikyaku? No, that’s going too far.”

“But I’m a bad kaikyaku, aren’t I?”

“Well, the government seems to think so. But I suppose there are good kaikyaku and bad kaikyaku, like everybody else. It’s a rare thing to know for sure which is which just by having a hunch about someone.”

“Bad kaikyaku bring calamities upon the kingdom.”

“Old wives’ tales.”

The quickness of his reply and the tone of his voice set off alarm bells in her head. It was exactly the same thing another person in this country had said. Though in that case it was a human woman.

“So you’re saying that if I go to En they’ll help me?”

“They will. The emperor of En gives sanctuary to kaikyaku. In En, kaikyaku can live their lives the same as everybody else, proof that it’s *people* that are good or bad, not kaikyaku. That’s why you should go to En. Now, why don’t you put that scary thing down?”

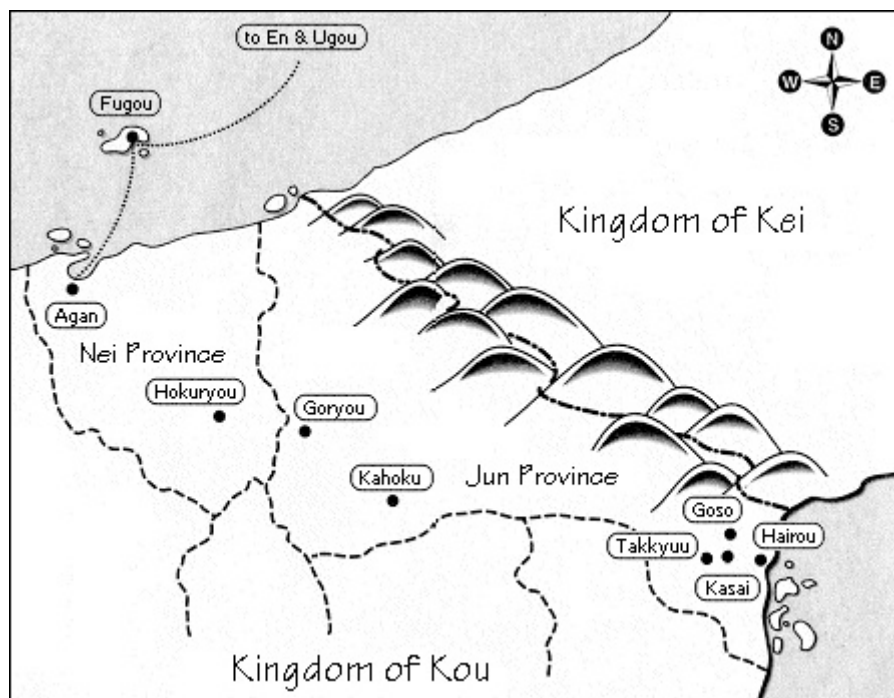
Youko hesitated several times, then lowered the sword.

“Pull up a chair. Your tea is getting cold.”

Youko sat herself down again. She had no idea what Rakushun was up to. Whenever her kaikyaku identity was exposed, it was best to get out of there as soon as possible. But she really wanted to know more about this En.

“Do you know the lay of the land around these parts?”

Youko shook her head. Rakushun nodded. Holding his teacup, he got down from the chair. He came over to where Youko was still holding the sword and leaned over the dirt floor.



“We are in An’you county in Jun province, a place called Kahoku,” Rakushun said, drawing a rough map in the dirt. “This is the Kyokai, and Shin county is here. Hairou is in this vicinity. That means you have been traveling in a westerly direction right into the interior of Kou. If escaping was your goal—getting out of Kou—then you’ve been going in the wrong direction.”

Youko looked at the map with mixed emotions. Could she believe it? Could he be misleading her? Her doubts notwithstanding, she was starving for information. Right now, the desire for knowledge overcame her second thoughts.

“Bordering Jun on the west is Nei province. Following the main road, you’ll enter Hokuryou county. Further along the road, going in a northwestern direction, you’ll reach Agan. It’s a big port city on the Blue Sea, one of the inner seas.”

Rakushun sketched the rough map and wrote out the place names with a remarkably fine hand. “You can take a ship from Agan north across the Blue Sea. Your destination is En.”

Rakushun wrote “The Kingdom of En,” using the Chinese character for a wild goose.

“It’d be a good idea to head first for Hokuryou before going on.”

But how would she get aboard a ship? If the port was guarded, it’d be like putting the noose around her own neck.

“You’ll be okay,” Rakushun laughed, as if reading her thoughts. “What I’m saying is, if a person in Shin wanted to escape Kou, the fastest way would be to head due north and cross the mountains into Kei. The constables would never expect you to take the route you’ve taken. Your getting lost may have been a blessing. The wanted posters describe a red-haired young girl. Do something about that big sword and no one will know who you are.”

“I see.” Youko stood up. “Thank you,” she said.

Rakushun looked up at her in surprise. “Hey, you’re not thinking of leaving right away, are you?”

“Better sooner than later. I don’t want to be a burden.”

Rakushun jumped up. “Better later. You really are impatient, aren’t you?”

“But . . .”

“After you get to the Kingdom of En, then what? Walk around grabbing people off the street and asking them if they know a guy named Keiki? Do you know how to book passage on a ship? How to petition for sanctuary in En?”

Youko looked away. Compared to her journey up till now, with only this new destination fixed in her mind, a considerably different future had opened up to her. Nevertheless, there would be more obstacles like this she would have to surmount. And these likely didn’t amount to a tenth of what awaited her.

“You can’t go rushing off without any preparation. If you don’t prepare now, you’ll be boxing yourself into a corner later.”

Youko nodded. There was still a part of her that feared falling into a trap, but on this point she had no choice but to trust Rakushun.

“That’s right. Have something to eat, put some meat on your bones. Even setting a quick pace, it will take a month to get to Agan.”

Youko nodded again. At least until she got the better part of her strength back. That’d give her time to figure out what Rakushun was up to as well. Was he simply doing this out of the goodness of his heart, or was it part of some deeper stratagem? She had to get to Agan and then to En. But more than that, she first had to ascertain Rakushun’s true intentions.

Chapter 38

[5-4] Rakushun said as they were cleaning up after lunch, “I hear it was quite a big shoku.”

“That’s what one of the elders of Hairou said.”

“The news is that the wheat crops in the eastern region of Shin County got completely wiped out. It was a big tragedy.”

Youko only nodded. Somewhere in her heart she felt a twinge of guilt.

“I seem to have touched upon a sore spot. Not because you think it was your fault, I hope.”

“It doesn’t mean I’m all depressed about it,” Youko said, scraping the ashes out of the stove.

The rat’s furry tail reached over and rapped her lightly on the knuckles. “Shoku do not happen because kaikyaku show up. It’s a shoku that brings the kaikyaku here.”

Rakushun instructed her to deposit the ashes into a wooden box. The remaining embers were stored in another container.

Youko said, “Can I ask you something?”

“What’s that?”

“What exactly is a shoku?” The elderwoman in Hairou had said it was something like a storm or tempest but she still didn’t understand its exact nature.

“Ah, so you don’t know what a shoku is. You don’t have shoku where you’re from?”

“Well, it’s written the same as an *eclipse* of the sun or the moon. We have those.”

“They’re not dissimilar omens in some respects, except that the sun or moon don’t appear to wane. So I guess you could say it is like a great tempest. An

ordinary tempest throws the air into turmoil. A shoku throws the spirits into turmoil.”

“But there’s also wind and rain?”

“There can be wind and rain. There are shoku that blow through like a typhoon. They are rare. Earthquakes and thunder and rivers flowing backwards, sinkholes appearing out of nowhere, any kind of natural disaster you can think of—that’s what a shoku is. In Hairou, the bottom of Lake Youchi rose up and all the water flooded out. The whole lake vanished off the map.”

Youko washed her hands after dumping out the ashes. “Are they always so destructive?”

“It depends. We fear shoku far more than typhoons. You never know what will happen during a shoku.”

“But why should such things happen?”

With a serious expression on his face, Rakushun set to making tea as if it were the most important thing in the world. “From what I’ve heard, a shoku is when *here* and *there* get tangled together. When things that were meant to be apart come together and overlap each other, disasters follow. I don’t really understand it myself but I think that’s what’s going on.”

“Here and there . . .”

The tea he made looked like green tea. The aroma was quite different. It resembled a herbal tea, with a quite soothing flavor.

“*There* is what lies beyond the Kyokai. *Here* is here. I can’t think of any other name for it.”

Youko nodded.

“The Kyokai encompasses the land. Beyond the land, the Kyokai goes on forever.”

“Forever?”

“Forever, with no end in sight, or so we are told. Explorers have sailed off searching for the end of the Kyokai. None have returned.”

“So over here the earth really is flat.”

Climbing onto his chair, Rakushun gave Youko a startled look. “But of course it is. Otherwise we’d all be in difficult fix, now, wouldn’t we?” There was surprise and laughter in his voice.

“Well, then, what shape does this world have?”

Rakushun picked up a walnut and placed it on the table. “In the middle of the world is *Suusan*.”

“Suusan?”

“The Supreme Mountain. It’s also called *Suukou*, the Pinnacle, or *Chuuzan*, the Middle Mountain. Surrounding Suusan at the four cardinal points of the compass are the Eastern, Western, Southern and Northern Mountains. They are more commonly known as *Houzan*, the Mountain of Wormwood; *Kazan*, the Mountain of Splendor; *Kakuzan*, the Mountain of Immediacy; and *Kouzan*, the Mountain of Permanence. The story goes that the Eastern Mountain was formerly called Taishan^[10]. The ruler of the northern kingdom of Tai changed the spelling of his family name from the character meaning *generations* to the character meaning *peaceful calm*, the same as Taishan. In deference to him, Taishan was changed to Houzan. Together they are called *Gozan*, the Five Mountains.”

“No kidding.”

“Encompassing these five mountains is the Yellow Sea. Though called a sea, it is not a body of water. Rather, it is said to be filled with craggy wastelands and deserts and swamps and an ocean of trees.”

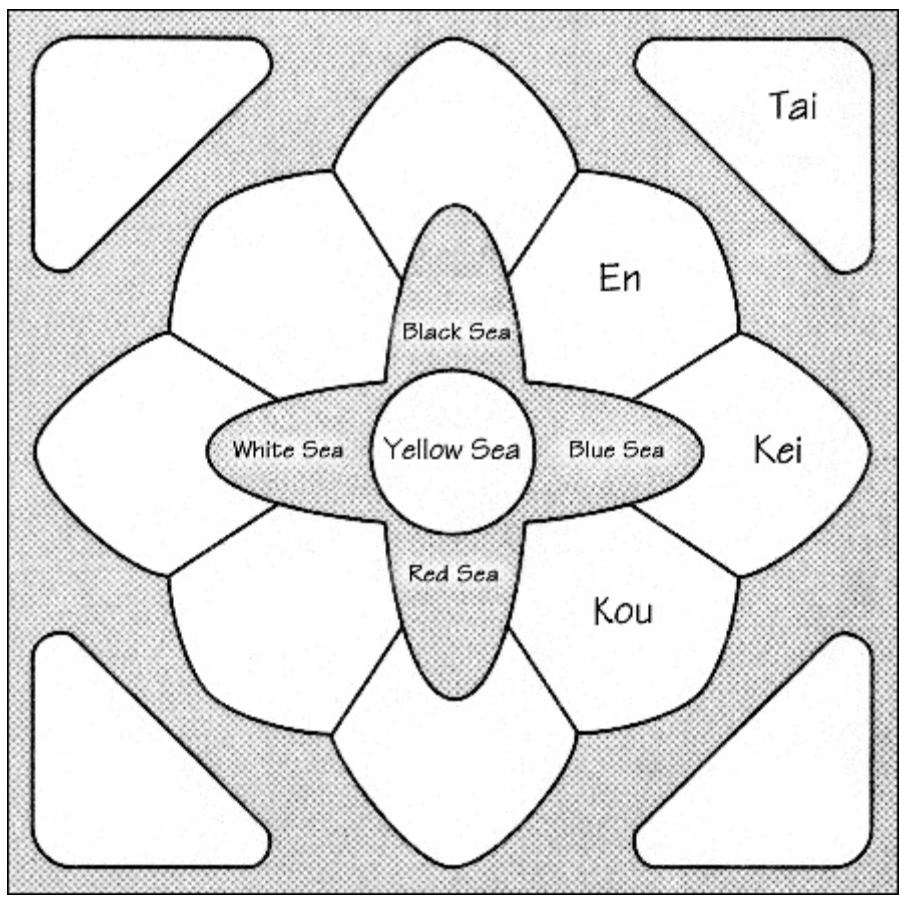
Youko paid close attention to the characters he was writing. “You’ve never seen it?”

“There’s no way I could. Encircling the Yellow Sea are the *Kongou*, the Adamantine Mountains. No mortal being can dwell within them.”

“Oh.” It really did look to her like an old map of some ancient world.

“The Adamantine Mountains are bordered by four seas. To the north, northeast, south, southwest, east, southeast, west, and northwest, eight

kingdoms encircle the seas. Beyond them is the Kyokai. Adjacent to these eight kingdoms are four big islands. The four island kingdoms plus the eight kingdoms that surround the Yellow Sea are the Twelve Kingdoms.”



Youko examined the geometric arrangements of walnuts. It looked like a flower, the kingdoms arrayed about the Gozan like the flower’s petals.

“And there’s nothing else?”

“Nothing else. Only the Kyokai reaching out to the very end of the world.” *But*, he seemed to say to himself. “Tales have been told of an island far away at the eastern edge of the world, fairy tales about a place called the Kingdom of Hourai. Also known as Japan.”

The character he wrote down was *Wa*, the ancient name for Yamato^[11].

“Really? The same *Yamato* as Japan?”

When she wrote out the character herself, it definitely was Yamato. Youko bit her lip. Was it because of how the language was translated?

“It’s also said that Yamato is where kaikyaku come from.”

This time she clearly heard “Yamato.” Because she knew the word as well in her native language, she didn’t need it translated for her.

“It all might be tall tales, but when you listen to what the kaikyaku say, it seems that there is undoubtedly a country called Yamato. Ships have sailed off in search of Yamato. They too have never returned.”

If indeed Japan did exist at the furthest reaches of the Kyokai, it might be possible to reach it by sailing east. But Youko knew the chances of that were slim. The only way home was through the shadow of the moon.

“There’s also a legend that says that deep within the Adamantine Mountains is a place called Kunlun^[12]. Beyond Kunlun is China. China is the home of the *sankyaku*, the visitors (*kyaku*) from across the mountains (*san* or *zan*).” Rakushun wrote down the character for Han^[13] to represent China.

“Sankyaku? You mean there are other people who get tangled up in this place, not just kaikyaku?”

“That’s right. Kaikyaku wash up on the shores of the Kyokai. Sankyaku are found wandering at the foot of the Adamantine Mountains. There aren’t a lot of sankyaku in this kingdom, though. Kaikyaku or sankyaku, you’ve got to run for your life.”

“Figures.”

“Han or Yamato, normal people just can’t come and go. Only youma and the mountain wizards can. When there is a shoku, people from over there are caught up in the currents. Those people are sankyaku and kaikyaku.”

“Huh.”

“It’s said that the people of Yamato and Han live in houses made of gold and silver, studded with jewels. Their kingdoms are so wealthy that farmers live like kings. They gallop through the air and can run a thousand miles in a single day. Even babies have the power to defeat youma. Youma and wizards have supernatural powers because they travel to those other worlds and drink from magical springs deep within the mountains.”

Rakushun looked at Youko expectantly. Youko shook her head with a rueful smile. What a strange conversation this was. If she ever returned to her old world, nobody would believe her. *Fairy tales*, they’d say. And here, her world was a fairy tale as well. She laughed to herself. She’d believed all along that *this*

was the strange and mysterious world. But in the end, wasn't she and the place she came from all the more so?

That must be why, she concluded at length, kaikyaku were hunted down like dogs.

Chapter 39

[5-5] For a long, empty moment, Youko thought about the past and the fate of so many kaikyaku. She said, “The kaikyaku who end up here are killed because everybody automatically associates kaikyaku with shoku.”

“That’s what it’s come to, I guess. What’s your occupation, Youko?”

“I’m a student.”

“Yes, yes,” Rakushun said excitedly. “There are kaikyaku who possess skills that we do not, who know things that we do not. I’ve heard that they can survive with the protection of powerful patrons . . . don’t you think?”

But of course, Youko thought, an ironic smile coming to her lips. She didn’t know anything worth anything in this world. She said, “Do you know of any way of returning to Yamato?”

In response to her question, a frown came clearly to his face. “I don’t.” He hesitated, then added, “Perhaps I shouldn’t say this, but I don’t think there is a way.”

“That can’t be true. If I *came* here, then there’s got to be a way for me to *leave* here.”

At the tone of Youko’s voice, Rakushun’s whiskers drooped. “No mortal being can cross the Kyokai, Youko.”

“But I crossed the Kyokai. That’s how I got here in the first place.”

“Even if you were able to arrive here, there’s no way to leave. I have never heard of a kaikyaku or sankyaku returning to his home country.”

“That can’t be right.” She simply could not accept that it was not possible. “What about another shoku? I could wait for another shoku and get home the same way I came.”

In response to Youko’s spirited objections, Rakushun only sadly shook his head. “Nobody knows when and where a shoku might occur. And even if you did, there’s no way a mortal being could travel to that other world.”

No, that can't be true, Youko again fervently told herself. If she couldn't go home, then Keiki would have told her so. He hadn't said a thing about it. She'd sensed nothing in his attitude or manner that suggested that it was a one-way trip.

"But I fled from Yamato to get away from the kochou."

"A kochou? You escaped a kochou and came here?"

"That's right. With a man named Keiki."

"And he's the person you're looking for?"

"Yes. This guy named Keiki brought me here. To tell the truth, it was because the kochou and the rest of them were hunting me. He said that in order to protect me, I had to come here." She looked at Rakushun. "I believed that once I was safe, I could go back. That makes sense, doesn't it? He said that if I really wanted to go home, he would take me."

"Nonsense."

"Keiki had these creatures with him who could soar through the air. Animals who could talk like you. As the crow flies, it was a one-day trip, that's what he said. It's not the kind of thing you'd say if you were going on a journey where there'd be no coming back, right?"

Youko spoke as if pleading her case to a judge. For a while Rakushun said nothing.

"Rakushun?"

"I really don't know. But I'd say that something quite important is going on."

"It's that big a deal, just based on what I told you?"

"A very big deal. If a youma like a kochou showed up around here, it'd be a very big deal. Every town within shouting distance would empty out. And you're talking about a kochou going after one person, and going as far as that other world. This is the first time I've ever heard of such a thing. And then a man called Keiki brought you here?"

"That's right."

“It’s said that youma and wizards and their kith and kin can take themselves back and forth. As for this Keiki person, no matter what kind a being he is, taking somebody *else* along with him? That’d be a new one in my book. Whatever happened, I don’t think I’m the one to figure it out. But I know this much: it’s definitely *not* the kind of thing that happens on a regular basis.”

After pondering the matter for a while, Rakushun looked at Youko with his jet-black eyes. “So, as things stand now, what do you want to do? Keep yourself safe at all costs? Or go home?”

“I want to go home.”

Rakushun nodded. “As I expected. But that’s not something I know how to do. In any case, I think you ought to go to En.”

“I agree. And after that?”

“You can’t expect much help from government officials or the province lords. I think your best bet would be to go to En and ask for help directly from the Imperial En.”

Youko stared in amazement at the characters Rakushun was writing. “The Imperial En? You mean the emperor?”

Rakushun nodded. “The Kingdom of En has been ruled for generations by the Imperial En^[14].”

“Is an emperor going to bother to help me?”

“I don’t know.”

You’ve got to be kidding! Youko wanted to shout but held her tongue.

“What I do know is that it’s better than staying here in Kou. At least better odds than beseeching the emperor of Kou. Perhaps it’s because the Imperial En is a *taika*.”

“A *taika*?”

“*Fruit of the womb*, it means. The way children are born in that other world. It’s really rare here. A *taika* is a person from this world who is born by mistake in that other world.”

Youko's eyes opened wide. "What are you saying?"

"It really is rare. But even then, I'd be hard-pressed to say whether it's being born by mistake over there that's rare, or just returning here that's rare."

"Huh."

"There are three well-known taika: the Imperial En of the Kingdom of En, the *Saiho* of En, and the *Saiho* of the Tai Kingdom."

"Saiho?"

"A counselor or advisor to the emperor. There's talk that the Saiho of Tai has died. The whereabouts of the Tai emperor are unknown. The kingdom is in turmoil and nobody wants to go anywhere near the place. You really ought to make En your destination."

Youko found herself a bit overcome, partly because her brain was suddenly crammed with so much new information, and partly because all at once a whole new view of things had appeared before her.

Going to visit the emperor—that was on a par with visiting a prime minister or president. Was it even possible? At the same time, the prospect of getting caught up in such weighty matters left her lightheaded and confused.

As she turned all this over in her head, she heard the sound of footsteps outside.

Chapter 40

[5-6] The front door opened, revealing the figure of a middle-age woman.

“Rakushun,” she said.

The rat raised his head. “Hi, Mom.” He quivered his whiskers nervously. “I picked up a most interesting house guest.”

Youko couldn’t help but gawk. This person was definitely a woman and definitely human. The woman looked back and forth between Youko and Rakushun, a surprised expression on her face. “A guest, you say. And who is this young lady?”

“I found her in the forest. She washed ashore in Shin County during that recent shoku.”

“You don’t say,” the woman muttered to herself, giving Rakushun a stern look.

Youko drew back her shoulders. Had this woman heard the rumors of a kaikyaku who’d escaped from Shin? And if she had, would she give her shelter as Rakushun had?

“Yes, it was quite terrible.” The woman turned to Youko, who was holding her breath in anticipation. She smiled, glanced back at Rakushun. “What in the world have you been up to? It’s a good thing I decided to check in on you. Have you been taking good care of her?”

“I certainly have.”

“Well, let’s hope so.” Laughing, the woman looked at Youko with bright eyes. “Sorry I couldn’t be here. I had some tasks that needed tending to. I hope Rakushun has done a good job taking care of you.”

“Um . . . yes.” Youko nodded. “I had a bad fever and could hardly move on my own. He was a great help. I’m very thankful.”

Heavens! the woman’s expression said. She hurried over to Youko. “Are you all right? Should you be up and about?”

“I’m fine. I really was well taken care of.”

As she answered, Youko searched the woman's face. She was okay with Rakushun because he wasn't human. But she couldn't be sure about this person.

"That being the case, all the more reason for coming and getting me. He doesn't always use his head."

Rakushun lifted his nose with a put-out air. "I did take good care of her. See, she's healed up just fine."

The woman peered at Youko's face. "Healed up fine, you say? Anything still hurt? Perhaps you ought to go back to bed."

"I am feeling better. Really."

"So it seems. But what are you wearing this flimsy old thing for? Rakushun, get her a kimono."

Rakushun ran into the other room.

"Oh, the tea's gone cold. Wait a minute and I'll brew up a fresh pot."

Youko watched as the woman firmly closed the front door, bustled past her and went out the back door to the well. When Rakushun returned, carrying a kimono that resembled a light overcoat, she whispered to him, "Your mom?"

"Yes. My dad passed away a long time ago."

She couldn't help wondering if his father was a human or a rat. "Your *real* mom?" she asked cautiously.

Rakushun responded with a puzzled look. "Of course she's my real mom. She's the one who picked me."

"Picked you?"

Rakushun nodded. "She picked me—the fruit that held me—from the *riboku*. The family tree." He stopped suddenly, as if something had just occurred to him. "Is it true that in that other world, a child grows inside his mother's stomach?"

"Ah, yes. That's the normal way of things."

"The fruit grows inside her stomach? But how do you pick it, then? Does it hang down from her belly?"

"I'm not quite sure what you mean by *pick*."

“You take the *ranka* from the tree.”

“The ranka?”

“The egg-fruit. About this big around.” He opened his arms as if carrying a basket. “It’s a yellow fruit. Inside is a child. It grows on a branch of a riboku. The parents come and pick one. Don’t egg-fruits grow over there?”

“Well, not quite.” Youko pressed her hands to her temples. What ought to be common sense here clearly wasn’t. Rakushun looked at her expectantly. Youko smiled to cover her self-consciousness. She said, “Over there, a child forms in his mother’s belly. His mother gives birth to him.”

Rakushun’s eyes grew wide. “Like a chicken?”

“Not quite but that’s the general idea.”

“How does it work, then? Is there a branch inside her stomach? How do you pick the fruit when it’s inside her stomach?”

“Oh, good grief . . .”

Youko was holding her head in her hands when Rakushun’s mother returned. “Tea’s ready,” she said. “You hungry?”

As Rakushun caught her up to date about Youko, his mother nimbly prepared some scone-like pastries.

“And then,” said Rakushun, breaking the big scone into pieces with his little hands, “we were thinking the best course of action might be to go to En and check out things there.”

His mother nodded. “Yes, indeed. I would agree.”

“With that in mind, I’ll take her as far as Kankyuu. We’ll need to get her some clothes she can bring with her.”

His mother looked Rakushun in the eyes. She said brusquely, “You’re going to do what?”

“There’s nothing to worry about. I’ll be there and back before you know it! She doesn’t know where anything is, so I’ll show her the way. You’re tough as an ox, Mom. You’ll be okay on your own, right?”

His mother gave Rakushun a long look, then nodded. “Well, all right, then. You be careful, though.”

“Rakushun,” Youko interjected. “I appreciate your concern for me but I don’t want to cause you any more trouble. Once you show me the way, I’m sure I can figure things out.”

She couldn’t bring herself to say that she found the prospect of a traveling companion quite alarming. “I don’t want to impose on you. You could draw me a map like you were showing me before.”

“Youko, if it were simply a matter of getting to En, *assuming* that you’d then be in a position to petition the emperor, you could never do it on your own. Even knowing the way, it will take at least three months to get to the palace in Kankyuu. In the meantime, what will you eat? Where will you stay? How will you pay for anything?”

Youko couldn’t answer.

“This is *not* a journey you want to take by yourself. You said it yourself, you don’t know anything about this world.”

Youko thought about it. After thinking it through for a while, she nodded. “All right.”

As she spoke, out of the corners of her eyes she caught sight of the shrouded sword. Perhaps it would be better to have Rakushun along for the journey. Both he and his mother seemed ready to give her what help they could, though that wasn’t necessarily the real truth. Whether friend or foe, she couldn’t know for certain. But she couldn’t afford to take chances as long as they knew where she was going. If the authorities were quickly informed as soon as she left, what awaited her in Agan would not be a ship, but a cage.

If Rakushun accompanied her, however, he’d essentially become her hostage. And if by chance he proved an unacceptable risk, her sword would settle the question.

Thinking this, she was struck by the feeling that she truly had become a pathetic creature.

Chapter 41

[5-7] Five days had passed since Youko had set off with Rakushun. At least he and his mother had treated her like they were sympathetic to her plight, and that gave her time to rest and recuperate.

“You have no idea what the two of them have up their sleeves,” the blue monkey lectured her. This was hardly news to her.

Rakushun’s mom made all the preparations for their journey. Despite subsisting on an even more meager income than Takki, she was able to put together a change of clothes for Youko. The clothing was rough and plain and seemed made originally for a larger man. Youko guessed they had belonged to Rakushun’s father.

It only made Youko more wary. She could not believe they were simply a pair of good Samaritans. She was still okay with Rakushun because of his non-human form. She didn’t have the courage to trust his mother completely.

“Why are you doing so much to help me?” she asked when Rakushun’s home finally disappeared from view. She couldn’t bear not knowing any longer.

Rakushun stroked his whiskers with his small forefeet. “Well, it’s because you were all alone and we have to get you to Kankyuu.”

“Don’t you think that giving me the directions would be enough?”

“What are you talking about? The sights in Kankyuu aren’t half bad, or so I’ve heard. A most interesting place. It’s like that other world, probably because that’s where the emperor is from.”

“Like Yamato or like China?”

“Like Yamato. The Imperial En came from Yamato.”

“And that’s your only reason?”

Rakushun looked up at Youko. “You still don’t trust me, do you, Youko?”

“And perhaps you’ve been overdoing it a bit?”

The rat was carrying a knapsack on his back. He scratched the fur on his chest. "Well, look at me. I'm a *hanjuu*."

"A hanjuu?"

"A half-human, half-beast. A chimera. The Imperial Kou doesn't like hanjuu either. He hates kaikyaku, hates anything that is *different*."

Youko nodded.

"There aren't a lot of kaikyaku in Kou. Most kaikyaku wash ashore in the eastern kingdoms. But when I say *most*, in fact their actual numbers aren't that great."

"About how many?"

"I'd say one shows up every couple years or so."

"Huh," said Youko. That was more than she would have imagined.

"At any rate, the greatest number of kaikyaku are found in Kei, perhaps because Kei is the easternmost of the kingdoms. After that, En and then Kou. There aren't many hanjuu in Kou. I couldn't tell you why or to what degree."

"Are there many in the other kingdoms?"

"More than there are in Kou. I'm the only hanjuu around these parts. The emperor isn't a bad person but he does have his prejudices. He deals severely with kaikyaku and keeps his distance from hanjuu like me." Rakushun gave his whiskers a twitch. "I don't mean to boast but I am the sharpest apple in the barrel around here."

Unable to grasp the intent of this statement, Youko just looked at him.

"Not to mention intelligent, quick-witted, and fairly even-tempered."

Youko laughed politely. "Of course you are."

"Yet all that won't make me a full-fledged human being. I'll always be half a man no matter how much time passes. Because I'll never be anything more than half-beast. It was set in stone when I was born in this form. Not being able to do anything about it doesn't make it my fault."

Youko replied with a slight nod. Though she vaguely understood what he was

getting at, it didn't assuage any of her misgivings.

"A kaikyaku is the same. Killing a kaikyaku for being a kaikyaku is not something I can condone."

"Indeed."

Rakushun scratched the bottoms of his big ears. "Do you know what a *joushou* is? It's a district academy. I was first in my class and was recommended by the dean to the provincial university. If I had attended university, I could have become a local government official."

"Is a district bigger than a county?"

"Bigger than a prefecture. There are a handful of districts in a province. How many's a handful depends, though. Each district has a population of fifty thousand households. Each district has four prefectures with a population of twelve thousand, five hundred. There are five counties to a prefecture."

"Huh." Youko had a hard time wrapping her head around a number like fifty thousand.

"In fact, I only made it to the district academy after my mom petitioned over and over, and she was finally able to get me admitted. If my grades were good, I knew I could go to the university and become a government official. Because I'm half-human, I won't get an allotment. But even without an allotment, I could make a decent life for myself. As it turns out, though, hanjuu aren't allowed into the provincial university."

"Oh."

"In order to pay my tuition to the district academy, my mom ended up selling her own allotment."

"And now?"

"And now she's a tenant farmer. She farms land rented from one of the richer homesteads in the area."

"Homestead?"

"Homesteads are granted by the executor for public lands. After getting permission from the government, the newly cultivated land is called a

homestead. Still, my mom can work the land, not me. People don't hire out hanjuu. The taxes are too high."

Youko tilted her head to one side. "Why's that?"

"Among the hanjuu, there are also those of us who resemble bears or cows. They are more powerful than ordinary humans. But what it comes down to is, the emperor doesn't like hanjuu. That's all."

"Yeah, that really sucks."

"He doesn't hate us as much as kaikyaku. I can't say we're arrested or executed or things like that. But we're not counted as part of the official census. That's why we're not given allotments or jobs. My mom has to provide for both of us. That's why we're so poor."

"Oh."

"I'd really like to get a job." Rakushun gestured to the purse hanging around his neck. "This is all the money my mom saved up so that I could pay the tuition at a university in En. In En, even hanjuu are admitted to the best universities in the country and become important statesmen. I'd be recognized as a legal adult, given an allotment and included in the census. I thought that if I went to En with you, I could get myself a job, too."

So it wasn't all out of the kindness of his heart, Youko thought cynically. There was no malice in it, but this was no altruistic act.

"Yes, it all makes perfect sense."

There was a barb in her voice that made Rakushun stop and look at Youko for a moment. But he kept his thoughts to himself.

Youko said nothing more after that. Everybody kept his own welfare first and foremost in mind. Question any act of charity deeply enough and she'd discover a kernel of selfishness in it. That's why she begrudged nothing Rakushun had said.

Of course, Youko thought. *That's why we betray one another.* In the end, everybody was out for number one. Not even the biggest saint in the world could live with another person's welfare solely in mind.

Chapter 42

[5-8] That evening they arrived at a city called Kakuraku, a city as big as Kasai.

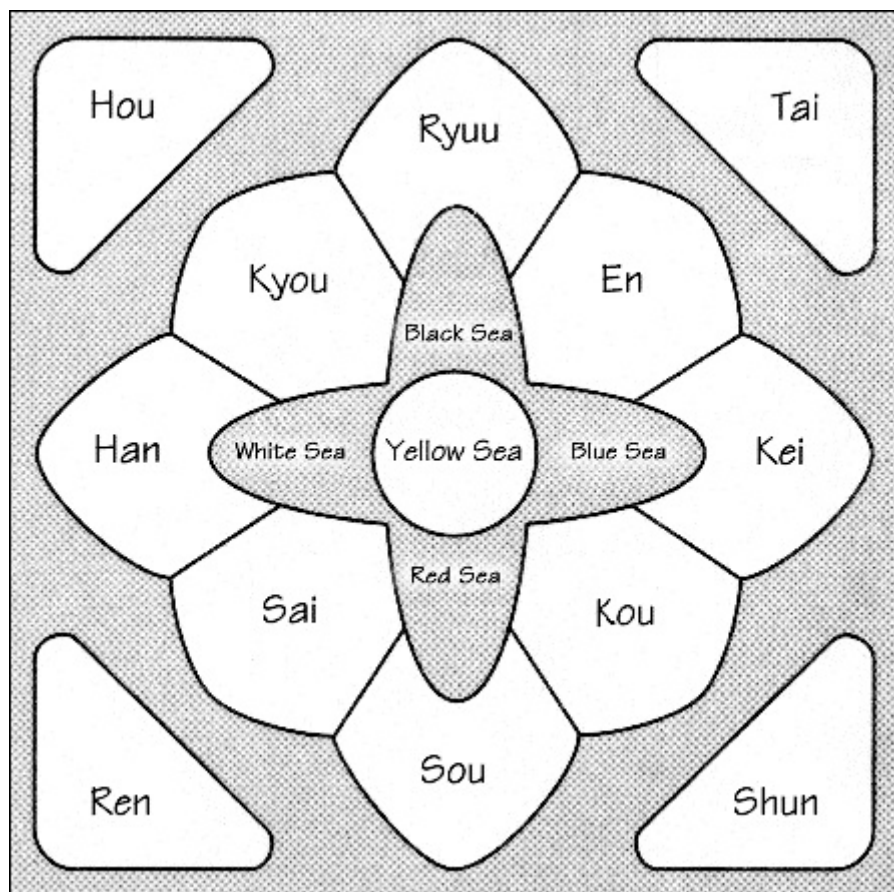
Youko had traveled with a person from this world before. Compared to then they were on a much tighter budget. They ate dinner at a roadside stand and spent the night in the cheapest inn. A single night costs fifty sen. For that she got a bed in a big room sectioned off with folding screens. Because Rakushun was picking up the tab, Youko was in no position to complain.

Rakushun passed off Youko as his younger brother. If nobody had a problem with him having a human mother, they shouldn't have a problem with him having a human brother. And, in fact, no one gave them so much as a second glance.

It was at first an uneventful journey. As they walked along, Rakushun helpfully explained things. "The Twelve Kingdoms are made up of four Great Realms (*Taikoku*), four Principalities (*Shuukoku*), and four Outlands (*Kyokukoku*)."

"Four Great Realms?" Youko glanced over her shoulder at Rakushun, tottering along beside her.

"That's right. The four Great Realms are the Eastern Kingdom of Kei, the Southern Kingdom of Sou, the Western Kingdom of Han, and the Northern Kingdom of Ryuu. The Great Realms are not particularly bigger than the Principalities, but that's what they're called. The Principalities are En Shuukoku, Kyou Shuukoku, Sai Shuukoku and Kou Shuukoku. The four Outlands are Tai, Shun, Hou and Ren."



“In other words, Tai Kyokukoku, Shun Kyokukoku, Hou Kyokukoku and Ren Kyokukoku?”

“Correct. Each is ruled by an emperor or empress. The Imperial Kou is known as the Mountain Emperor. His palace is in Gousou, in Ki Province. It is called *Suikou*, the Palace of Green Bamboo.”

“Gousou is a city?”

Rakushun pointed off to the left at the mountains coming into view. The land was very hilly here. In the distance she could see a rising line of foothills, and beyond, dimly visible, an even more formidable range of towering mountains.

“In that direction, far beyond those mountains, is a mountain that reaches to heaven. Mount Gousou. At its peak is Suikou, the Palace of Green Bamboo. Around the foot of the mountain is the city of Gousou.”

“No kidding.”

“The emperor rules the country from there. He appoints the province lords, promulgates laws, and allocates public lands to the people.”

“What do the province lords do, then?”

“The province lords are the *de facto* rulers of each province. They are

responsible for the disposition of provincial lands, the welfare of the citizenry, and the conduct of the military. They formalize and execute the laws, conduct the census, collect taxes, and mobilize the troops in times of emergency.”

“It sounds to me like the emperor isn’t the person who’s really running things.”

“It is the job of the emperor to provide the guidelines for the administration of the government.”

She didn’t really understand, but perhaps it was like the federal system^[15] in the United States.

“The emperor lays down what is known as the Law of the Land. The province lords can also legislate but they cannot go against the Law of the Land. Neither can the Law of the Land violate the Divine Decrees.”

“The Divine Decrees?”

“The Divine Decrees are handed down to the sovereign, declaring how a kingdom must be ruled. If you think of this world as broad pavilion, the Decrees are the pillars that hold it up. They’re also known as the Pillars of Heaven, or the Great Colonnade. Even emperors bow to their authority. As long as an emperor does not tread upon the Great Colonnade, he may rule his kingdom as he sees fit.”

“Huh. So who decided what this Great Colonnade was? You’re not telling me it’s some sort of god, are you?”

Well, Rakushun chuckled. “The story is that a long, long time ago, *Tentei*—the Lord God of the Heavens, the Divine Creator—vanquished the Nine Dominions and the Four Barbarian Domains that comprised the Thirteen Realms. Five gods and twelve mortals were spared and all the rest of humanity were returned to their eggs. In the center of the world, five mountains were created, and presided over by *Seioubo*, the Queen Mother of the West. The realm encircling the five mountains was transformed into the Yellow Sea. The five gods were appointed the Dragon Kings of the Five Seas.

“A creation myth, in other words.”

“So it is. Each of the remaining twelve was given a branch of a tree. A snake coiled around each branch, and each branch bore three fruits. The snakes

unwound themselves from each branch and lifted the sky to the heavens. The fruits fell down creating, in turn, the earth, a kingdom and a throne. Then each of the branches turned into a calligraphy brush.”

This is was a creation myth different from any Youko had heard of.

“The snakes are the pillars of the Great Colonnade. The earth represents the census. The kingdoms stand for the law. The thrones symbolize justice and virtue, or the Saiho and the ministers of the realm. And the brush records the history of the people.” Rakushun twitched his whiskers. “At that time none of us had been born, so nobody knows how true is really is.”

“Naturally.” When she was a lot younger, she’d read about Chinese creation myths in a children’s book. She remembered none of it now. Even so, she had a hard time believing there could be any similarities. “I take it this Tentei is the head God?”

“I guess you could put it that way.”

“So if you’re going to pray to anybody, Tentei is the guy to pray to?”

Pray to? Rakushun seemed to say, tilting his head to the side. “Well, if you were praying for a child, yes, you would petition the Tentei.”

“Other than that? What about praying for wealth and prosperity?”

“If you were asking for wealth and prosperity, you’d petition *Gyoutei*, the August God. Speaking of which, there are sects that worship Gyoutei. And in that same vein, to escape floods, there are those who look to *Utei*. To escape youma, there’s *Koutei*.”

“So there are all kinds?”

“Yes, and there are religions that worship all of them, too.”

“But it’s not something people normally do?”

“No need to. If the weather is good to us, the harvest will be bountiful. Whether the weather is good or bad depends on the conditions of the heavens. The rain falls on the happy and the sad, on the just and the unjust alike. When it doesn’t, there’s a drought. Praying about it won’t do any good.”

Youko was taken aback by this. “Yeah, but if there’s a flood, isn’t that going to

cause problems for everybody?”

“In order to prevent floods, the emperor orders that dikes and dams be built.”

“Or, say, frost damage?”

“So there won’t be famine at such times, wouldn’t it be up to the emperor to manage the distribution of food?”

I don’t get this at all. What she did get was that these people weren’t like the people she knew at all. “So what you’re saying is, nobody says prayers to pass a test, or save money, or stuff like that.”

It was Rakushun’s turn to look surprised. “Don’t things like that all depend on the effort of the individual involved? How would you go about praying for them?”

“Well, yeah, but . . .”

“If you study for a test, then you’ll pass. If you work hard, you’ll earn money. What exactly is praying about it supposed to accomplish?”

So that’s what this is all about. Youko laughed cynically to herself. Nobody crosses their fingers, nobody makes promises to God. So if you’ve got the chance to sell a kaikyaku into slavery, make yourself a little on the side, hey, what’s the problem? Waste not, want not.

“Yeah, I guess it figures,” she muttered, but there was a coldness in her words that made Rakushun look up at her and made his whiskers droop in disappointment.

It was something he usually boasted of only to himself, but Rakushun was well-studied and had an unusually sharp mind. He found it painful to think that despite this he should become a burden on his mother, and only because he was a half-human hanjuu.

Rakushun wanted to ask more about Youko and about Japan, but she had nothing more to say.

On the sixteenth day of their journey, the first attack came.

Chapter 43

[5-9] Evening approached. Goryou, the city they planned to stay in that night, had just come into view.

The travelers moving hastily along the highway created a crush of people in front of the gates. Youko found herself caught up with them and quickened her pace. It was about five hundred yards to the gates. To hurry them along, from within the walls a big drum began pounding. When the drum stopped sounding, the gates would close. Everybody started running. This only added to the throngs jammed up at the gates.

Then amongst the crowds somebody started yelling.

As if drawn along by the voice, a person, then two, then more looked back and up at the sky. Here and there the crowd came to a standstill. Noting this with great suspicion, Youko glanced back over her shoulder. Already she could clearly see the silhouette of a great bird. A great bird like an eagle with a horn. And there were eight of them.

“Kochou!”

The screams reverberated, a wave of humanity rushed toward Goryou. Youko and Rakushun took off at a sprint. But it was obvious the kochou would get there ahead of them.

With total disregard to the flood of people, the huge gates began to close.

Those idiots. They certainly had the right to defend themselves against the kochou, but even if there were nobody else but those inside the gates, what good would closing the gates do against these flying monsters?

“Wait!”

“Wait, please!”

The cries echoed out around them. Youko pushed Rakushun away from the crowds. They were still a good distance from the gates. Had they been alone at the gates, they would have been trampled and crushed by the onslaught of

people pushing and clawing their way through. It looked like some inner circle of hell.

Putting distance between her and the human tidal wave, Youko ran toward the city. She permitted herself a hollow laugh.

This is a country that asks nothing of God.

Even being attacked by youma, they expected nothing from their gods. So they thought nothing of tearing down the people in front of them to get there faster. Yet the gates closed on the travelers as if they weren't there. Whether or not they were being attacked by youma, wasn't it up to them to keep on their toes? And wasn't being rescued or not all up to them, solely the product of their own efforts?

"The fools!" she said aloud. This bunch couldn't be more powerless.

That sound grew nearer, like the wails of a crying baby. Youko stopped on the spot. Running along next to her, Rakushun looked back over his shoulder and shouted, "No, Youko, it's pointless! We won't make it!"

"You keep heading toward the city!"

The circling kochou was now close enough that she could see the spots on his breast. Glaring at it, she again motioned Rakushun toward the gate. She undid the shroud wrapped around the sword. That familiar sensation crawled along her skin. She was used to Jouyuu's touch by now and did not find it unpleasant at all. A smile came to her lips.

It's not pointless.

The kochou were taking their time. There were only eight of them and her sword would easily pierce their fat flesh. The bigger the foe, the bigger the target. At the intervals they were gliding in, they'd be easy pickings.

It'd been a while since she'd gone toe-to-toe with her enemies. Her gleeful self was looking forward to it. Her wounds had healed, she had energy to spare, and no doubts about defeating them. Hearing the cries of the people who could do nothing but run—many of whom would otherwise be hunting *her*—sent a strange thrill up her spine.

A rancid smell was in the wind. She prepared herself as the flock of kochou dove toward her. The blood boiled in her veins, the sound of raging seas roared in her ears.

I am an animal. A beast. No doubt about it. I am a youma.

That's why meeting her enemies on the field of battle was such a great joy.

The slaughter began. The slaughter of kochou, the slaughter of humans.

She felled the first one that came at her, and the second. By the time she had four down and four to go, the road was a river of blood. The fifth dropped on her like a crashing plane. She cut off its head, dodged the sixth. The sixth grazed her with its talons, tore through a bunch of travelers behind her and rose back into the sky.

Youko stood her ground and did her job. She'd long ago become used to the scent of blood, to the sensation of severing flesh and bone. The sight of dead bodies no longer aroused within her any sensitive feelings. To parry and kill, to draw blood and retreat—when it came down to it, that was all she cared about

She struck down the seventh and looked up at the sky. The eighth kochou was maintaining altitude, turning circles high in the air, as if confused about what to do next. The falling dusk turned the sky the color of rust. The dark shadow of the youma bird passed by overhead. No matter what powers Jouyuu gave her, she couldn't chase a kochou into the sky.

"Come on down," Youko muttered to herself. Come into the reach of *my* claws.

As she stared up at the wheeling shadow, she also searched the landscape out of the corners of her eyes. Her foes had appeared in the light of day. And that meant that the woman—the golden-haired woman—had to be close by.

If she was anywhere nearby, Youko would grab her. She could do that now. She'd grab her and find out what she was up to. And if the woman didn't have anything to say, Youko was pretty sure lopping off an arm would get her into a talking mood.

As she turned over the possibilities in her mind, she found herself aghast. Where did such ferocity come from? The nature of the beast was revealing itself to her. Or perhaps she was simply intoxicated from so much blood.

The shadow overhead suddenly changed the angle of its movements. *Here it comes.* Youko regripped the sword and strengthened her hold on the hilt. But in the moment she raised the sword, the bird corrected its course and once again climbed vigorously into the sky.

“C’mon!” she yelled. “Bring it on!”

Did a youma hold its own life precious? They’d had no problem attacking people up till today! Youko flipped the sword around and sank it into the corpse of the kochou at her feet. “You don’t come at me!” she shouted, fully intending her words to be understood, “I’ll cut your buddy here to pieces! How’s them apples, huh?”

The wheeling kochou suddenly plunged earthward, streaking toward her like an arrow. In a flash, Youko yanked the sword out of the corpse, flicked the flowering blood off the steel, parried the sharp, hooked talons and ran the sword through the bird’s legs.

The bird raised a strange cry, beat its wings. A great wind buffeted her as it tried to take itself back into the air, and her along with it. Youko stepped on its feet, freed the sword and sank the blade into its torso. She did not sense an immediate response to her thrust, but when she jumped back a moment later, pulling out the sword, blood gushed onto the ground.

It was easy work after that. Unable to hold itself aloft, the bird crashed to the earth. After a second strike and a third, she delivered the *coup de grace* and cut off its head. Nothing around her moved as she whipped the sword around in a great arc, flinging off the gore.

Not only the kochou but people as well lay in heaps on the road. She could hear moaning, so that meant that not all of them were dead. Dispassionately observing all of this, she wiped off the sword using the neck of the kochou. She reminded herself, *I said I didn’t want anybody coming with me.*

“Rakushun?”

When she looked back up the road toward Goryou, the gates had opened wide enough to allow a line of soldiers to stream out.

She again surveyed the ground between herself and the city gates. Some

distance removed from her, she spotted a fallen creature. Its gray fur was soaked with blood that had turned its coat a dark red.

“Rakushun.”

She started to run toward him then looked again at the city gates. The soldiers pouring through the gates were calling out to each other. She couldn’t catch what they were saying. She estimated the distance to Rakushun and the distance from him to the gates. She couldn’t judge the extent of his wounds from here, but doubted that all the blood muddying his fur came from kochou crumpled up on the ground close by.

Youko grasped the jewel hanging around her neck. She didn’t know if the jewel worked with everybody or if, like the sword, they only responded to her. But if the jewel was not particular about the patient, it would likely help Rakushun.

Thinking this, she held the jewel, unable to move. She should run to him, determine the state of his injuries and see whether the jewel had the power to help him. As far as Rakushun was concerned, that would be the best thing to do. But all the while she was treating him with the jewel the soldiers would be approaching. And the distance between them was simply not that great.

Standing there amidst the fallen bodies, Youko stood out like a sore thumb. Anybody observing from afar would have seen the kochou going at her and would know it had been her taking them down. That would strike anybody as more than a little suspicious.

She had a sword without a scabbard. It would take another two seconds to figure out that her hair was dyed and that she was a kaikyaku.

But if I take off now. . . . She looked at the prone, unmoving matt of fur. She didn’t think Rakushun would inform on her if she ran away and abandoned him here.

The sword that was the slender bundle she was carrying—the color of her dyed hair—dressed like a man—traveling to En by way of Agan—if such things were revealed, the noose would quickly draw tightly around her neck. But she didn’t have the physical strength to haul Rakushun along with her.

She should go back for Rakushun’s own good. And for her own good . . . The

blood throbbed in her veins. *Go over there and put him out of his misery.*

Are you crazy? a voice asked inside her head. Who was exhorting her to do such things? She didn't have time to second-guess herself. If Rakushun said too much, Youko wouldn't last long. She couldn't go back. She'd be throwing her own life away. She couldn't cast Rakushun aside like this. That was just as dangerous.

If she went back, the best she could do was find Rakushun's purse and take it with her. At least then she'd have a chance to get herself out of this predicament. She had time to do that. And nothing else.

The gate opened wider. More and more people rushed out. She took one look at the approaching stampede and instinctively retreated.

Once she made her move, she couldn't stop. She spun around. The remaining travelers rushing from the highway swarmed around her. She slipped through the crowds and left the scene at a sprint.

Chapter 44

[5-10] The falling dark cast the road into shadows. *It'll be okay*, she told herself as she walked along with hurried steps. *It will.*

After the night turned black and the pedestrian traffic vanished, she ran on without caring how it looked. Some ways from Goryou she turned at an intersection, leaving behind both the road they had started their journey on that morning, and the road to Goryou.

She had come far enough, but she kept going. No longer in a headlong fashion, but with that pervasive sense of being pursued.

It'll be okay, she told herself again.

Even if Rakushun fessed up about her, they didn't have photographs in this place, so she didn't think they'd catch up with her. Besides, wouldn't Rakushun cover up his own involvement? He wasn't likely to start talking about the kaikyaku who'd left him behind and taken off by herself, for fear of being thought guilty by association.

As she repeated this to herself, Youko stopped in her tracks. She felt a hole open up in her soul.

This wasn't the kind of thing she ought to be thinking about now.

Was Rakushun okay? Youko hadn't seen any severe wounds on him, but she couldn't know for certain that he wasn't badly injured.

Go back, a voice inside her said. She should go back and see how Rakushun was doing, and then make her escape.

Too dangerous, another voice said. Go back and you likely won't be able to do a thing.

You've got the jewel, a voice answered.

That didn't mean the jewel would do Rakushun any good. He could already be dead. Go back and she'd get captured. Get captured and it'd all be for naught. Get captured and *she'd* end up dead.

Is your life that precious to you?

There was no reason to suppose it shouldn't be.

You're stabbing your Good Samaritan in the back.

He didn't necessarily help me because he's good.

That doesn't change the reality of what he did. He gave you shelter and a place to hide.

He had his reasons. It wasn't out of the kindness of his heart. A person like that will betray you eventually.

So it's okay to abandon someone if their intentions aren't perfect? Do you really want to go down that road?

That place was filled with the dead and the dying, and amongst them was someone she knew, who knew her. And she was just going to cast him aside? Shouldn't she at least lend a helping hand? If she did, there were surely some people who might make it through alive.

Don't start glossing over reality with empty gestures, not in this country. When your number's up, that's it. Lights out.

But it wouldn't be an empty gesture. It was what people naturally did of their own accord. How could she forget that?

"Even now, at this late hour, you're going on about your *principles*, little girl?"

Even now, little girl. Even now!

"Yes, yes. Do go back and finish him off."

Youko jumped at the piercing sound of that screeching voice. The blue monkey's head appeared in the brush along the shoulder of the road. "Isn't that what you have been considering all along? Isn't it?"

"I . . ." Youko stared at the blue monkey. Her whole body trembled.

"Indeed, that's what you plan to do, no? And look at you, little girl, preaching yourself up a regular old sermon and all. You! Now!"

The monkey broke into gales of mad laughter.

“No . . . it isn’t.”

“Oh, yes, it is. That is *exactly* what you were thinking.”

“I would never do something like that!”

“Yes, you would.”

“I wouldn’t have. I couldn’t!”

The monkey cackled gaily. “Because the thought of murder frightens you or because you *wanted* to murder him but just couldn’t screw up the courage?” The monkey screeched, looking at her cheerfully. “Don’t you trust me? That’s okay. You’ll do it next time.”

“No!”

The blue monkey laughed on, ignoring her, the shrill sound remorselessly stabbing at her ears.

“I’m going back.”

“Even if you do, he’s long dead.”

“I don’t know that.”

“He’s dead, I say. Go back and you’ll be captured and killed. What’s the point?”

“I’m going back anyway.”

“Well. You think doing so will wash away your sins, no?”

Youko turned on her heels and stopped.

“Oh, going back is good. So you go back, you look down at his dead body and have yourself a good cry. It’d cancel out all those murderous thoughts just like that!”

Youko stared dumbfounded at the monkey’s cackling countenance. She was taking to herself. This was the sound of her own wretched voice. This was nothing other than the substance of her soul.

“He will surely betray you. Best you take care of it before then, no?”

“Be quiet.”

“Soldiers may be headed this way right now! That rat ratted you out for sure!”

“Shut up!” She took hold of the hilt of the sword and swung. The leafy tips of the bushes rained to the ground.

“Dying’s good, but snuffing out his candle would be *perfect*. You’re still so naive, little girl.”

“Enough, already!”

“Next time, then. Next time something like this happens, you’ll be sure to get the deed done.”

“Quit messing with me!” A whusk of air and more leaves dropped to the ground.

And if she did get the deed done, then what? If only abandoning him left such a weight on her heart, how could she go on living with murder on her conscience? Did her existence by itself trump all? Did it matter what miserable depths she sank to as long as she could stay alive?

“I’m glad I didn’t kill him.” She was glad she hadn’t acted rashly, hadn’t succumbed to temptation, and hadn’t put her thoughts into action.

The monkey laughed her to scorn. “So you’re just going to leave him alive to squeal on you?”

“Fine if he does!” She felt a tightness in her chest as the tears welled up. “He’s got the right. Let him complain about me all he wants!”

“Oh, so naive, so naive.”

Why couldn’t she trust people anymore? It wasn’t because she was afraid of being taken in. Even if she was, she should have been able to trust him.

“It’s because you think credulous things like that. It’s because you’re such an easy mark, so easy to take advantage of.”

“It’d be fine with me if he did.”

“How gullible you are!” The monkey’s laughter rent the night. “Really? Truly? Being played for the fool is just peachy with you?”

“If that’s what it comes down to, yes. The betrayer only betrays his cowardice.

It does me no harm. But better betrayed than be the betrayer.”

“Of course the betrayer is a coward. But in this demon-haunted world, he’s the one who comes out on top. No one will show you the slightest speck of kindness, little girl. Such souls do not exist here.”

“That has nothing to do with me.”

Because they tracked her down and drove her into a corner, was that reason enough to reject her own humanity? Was it reason enough to spurn anybody who approached her with good intentions? And then if their motives were not as pure as the driven snow, reason enough *not* to trust them in the least? If people showed her no more kindness than this, was that reason enough to show them no kindness as well?

“No, it is not.”

Whether she trusted others had nothing to do with whether or not she was betrayed. Whether or not others were kind to her had nothing to do with whether she was kind to them in turn. Even if she were all alone in this big, wide world, if not a single person would help her or grieve for her, that gave her no cause to play the jaded coward, to abandon those in need, to bring harm upon perfect strangers.

The monkey laughed hysterically. His earsplitting shrieks went on and on.

“I want to be strong.”

She firmly gripped the hilt of the sword. It had nothing to do with this world or these people. She wanted to hold her head high. She wanted to be strong.

The monkey suddenly stopped laughing. “You are going to die. You will never go home. No one will see your face again. You’ll be deceived and betrayed. You will die.”

“I’m not going to die.”

If she died here, she’d die a fool and a coward. Dying now would validate the worst part of herself. It’d be easy to brand her life as one not worth living, but she couldn’t permit herself such an easy way out.

“You will die. You will starve, you will tire, you will lose your head and you will

die.”

Youko swung the sword with all her might. The tip of the sword trimmed off the tops of the bushes and parted the air. She felt a strong reverberation in her arm. The monkey’s head tumbled down amidst the falling leaves, falling to the earth, scattering clots of blood as it rolled along.

“I will never give up.”

She could not stop crying.

She wiped away the tears with a stiff sleeve and started to leave. The color of gold glinted at her feet. For a long moment, Youko could not grasp what she was seeing. She stared, amazed. There it was, in the middle of a pool of dark blood where the monkey’s head should be, what she had lost so long ago.

The scabbard of the sword.

Part VI

Chapter 45

[6-1] Youko said, “He’s about this tall.” She grabbed hold of a passerby and indicated the height of a human child. “You haven’t seen someone who looks like a rat?”

The old woman regarded Youko suspiciously. “What’s this about? A hanjuu?”

“Yes. I heard that he was injured last night at the city gates.”

“Oh, you mean that kochou attack.” As she spoke, the old woman looked back over her shoulder. Goryou was visible in the distance. “Well, if you’re talking about them people injured yesterday, they’d be in one of those government buildings. The government is tending to their needs.”

The same answer Youko had been hearing all morning.

She’d waited until morning to return to Goryou. With the guards at the gate going over everybody with a fine-toothed comb, getting into the city would be well-nigh impossible. Even if checking out the municipal buildings was a good idea, there was no way she’d get anywhere near the place.

“Why not go to city hall and see for yourself?”

“Yes, well, um, he didn’t seem to be there.”

“In that case, you’d better check around the back.”

With that, the old woman resumed her journey. Around the back of the city was where the corpses were piled up in rows. Youko could see them from a distance, but even there the guards had their eyes peeled. She couldn’t get close enough to tell if Rakushun was among the dead.

The old lady had a big pack on her back. Youko helped her on her way and then approached the next group of travelers coming from Goryou.

“Excuse me,” she said, flagging down a man and woman. The man’s foot was wrapped in bandages and he was using a cane. Youko repeated the same

questions she had asked the old lady. They looked back at her with dubious expressions.

“Yesterday, a friend of mine was injured . . .”

“You!” The man abruptly pointed at Youko. “I don’t believe it! From yesterday, you’re that kid . . .”

Youko spun around. She didn’t need to hear the rest.

“Hey, wait a minute!”

Youko ignored him and ran off, darting through the lines of travelers.

The man’s injuries had no doubt been inflicted during the attack. And he’d remembered her. Since this morning, she’d had to flee like this a number of times. And every time she returned the number of guards at the gate increased. The city was getting that much harder to approach.

She left Goryou and went into the foothills and waited for things to calm down. If she kept at it like this, she was sure to be arrested. But even knowing this, she couldn’t leave Goryou.

Even if I do find out, then what?

She had to find out how Rakushun had fared. Not because she was trying to make up for abandoning him behind yesterday. That sin had been committed and there was no taking it back. Even if she got word that he was okay, she wouldn’t go into the city just to apologize to him. The guards would be on her in a second. And her death wouldn’t end up meaning anything more than that, after all.

I haven’t the slightest idea what to do next.

On the one hand, she had the sense that she was thinking too highly of her miserable existence. On the other, she had no desire to recklessly throw her life away. Unable to come to a resolution either way, she couldn’t bring herself to put Goryou behind her.

She wandered around, returning time and time again to the gates of Goryou. She approached traveler after traveler asking the same questions and getting the same answers. She found herself at a complete loss.

“Well, hello there.”

Somebody called out behind her. Youko’s initial impulse was to run. But as she glanced over her shoulder, among the faces in the crowd she saw a woman and child looking back at her.

“We met outside Bakurou, didn’t we?”

Youko stopped in her tracks, momentarily overcome with surprise. It was the mother and child she had met some time ago on a mountain road. They were syrup peddlers and they traveled with their merchandise strapped to their backs. They were still carrying those big packs.

“This is wonderful. You’re all right.” The mother smiled a rather puzzled smile. Her daughter looked up at Youko with an even more perplexed look on her face.

“Your injuries healed up okay, I take it?”

After a moment of confusion, Youko nodded and then bowed her head more deeply. “Thank you very much for what you did.”

She had brushed aside the helping hand they held out to her and ventured into the mountains. She had thanked them with words, but not from the bottom of her heart.

“It is good to see you again. We worried about you.” The woman smiled, this time a less-labored smile. “You see, Gyokuyou, she’s fine.”

She looked down at the girl, who was staring up at Youko with that confused expression on her face. The girl snuggled closer to her mother. Youko tried to smile and realized that she hadn’t smiled in a long time. The muscles in her face were stiff and unresponsive. It hardly felt like a smile at all.

Gyokuyou blinked and with a peevish expression tried to hide herself behind her mother. Youko leaned over and forced a smile to her lips. If they hadn’t given her water and the sweet syrup, she would not have survived the night. “I’ll always be grateful for the water and candy you gave me.”

The girl glanced back and forth between Youko and her mother. She started to laugh, and then, perhaps feeling self-conscious, grew serious again. But a moment later she giggled. The look on her face was so endearing and childlike, it

almost brought Youko to tears.

“I really am grateful. I’m sorry I didn’t have the opportunity to properly thank you.”

A smile filled Gyokuyo’s face. “Did it hurt?” she asked.

“Hurt?”

“Were you in a bad mood because it hurt so much?”

“Oh, yes. I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t hurt any more?”

“No. It’s healed up fine.” She showed her the fading scar in her hand. She wondered if either of them would notice that the wound had healed much faster than normal.

Gyokuyou glanced up at her mother. “She says it’s healed,” she said.

Her mother’s eyes brightened. “That’s wonderful. After we got to Bakurou, we wanted to come back and find you. But by the time we arrived, the gates were already closing and none of the guards had the guts to go out after nightfall. Are you looking for someone?”

Youko nodded.

“We’re headed for Goryou as well. Do you want to come with?”

Youko could only shake her head, no.

“Well, then,” the mother said. She took her daughter by the hand. “Gyokuyou, let’s go to the inn.” Then she looked at Youko. “Who are you searching for? A hanjuu, isn’t it?”

Youko stared at her.

“He’d probably be in one of the government buildings, or around in the back. What’s his name?”

“His name is Rakushun.”

She hitched up the big pack on her back and said, almost as if in passing, “You stay here and we’ll go and see.”

Youko bowed deeply. “Thank you.”

It was toward sundown when the woman returned, alone. She reported that she hadn’t found anybody called Rakushun among the living or the dead and then hurried back to the city. She gave no indication that she understood the details of Youko’s actual circumstances.

Chapter 46

[6-2] Having confirmed this much, Youko gave up. Maybe Rakushun had left the city without her knowledge. Maybe the woman had overlooked him. There was no way for her to know for sure.

Standing on the highway outside Goryou, Youko faced the city and bowed. She understood only that this was some sort of divine balancing of the scales. Here, in this place, she had come at last to the line she could not cross.

She traveled during the night, slept during the day. Her old life resumed. Having traveled this way so often, Youko's experiences of this country were of nothing but night.

Because Rakushun had been carrying the purse, she had no money. She spent the nights fighting the youma, the days sleeping hungry in the undergrowth. The days ran together. She didn't have time to feel sorry for herself. This time around she had a goal, she had a destination. She was going to Agan and sailing to the Kingdom of En. She couldn't be bothered to think about anything other than coming up with the money for the voyage.

After the old kaikyaku in Takkyuu ripped her off, Youko figured she'd wandered around for at least a month. With nothing to eat or drink, drawing on the powers of the jewel, that had proved her limit. With that understanding, this time around she was far more confident than on her previous adventures.

The blue monkey did not reappear. Since reclaiming the scabbard, the visions had gone dormant as well. The faint sounds of falling water would chime and light would shine out of the narrow gap where the scabbard rested against the hilt, but she didn't dare to draw the sword to see what the visions had in store for her. Instead, she forged on in silence, persistently pushing herself forward.

What a despicable thing to do. Do you really think your own life is so precious?

As she walked along, the blue monkey's words echoed in her heart. He was the substance of her own conscience to begin with. She didn't need him around to hear his voice clearly.

“Yes, it is.”

But still the kind of life that throws a Good Samaritan to the wolves, no?

“It may not be worth much, but right now it’s the only life I’ve got. That’s the way it is.”

You should have turned yourself in. That would have made up for everything, no?

“I’ll consider it once I get to En.”

At times she was sure she could hear the monkey’s cackling laughter. *In other words, your life is the only life that matters around here.*

“You got it. As long as I’m being hunted down, staying alive is what counts. Once I don’t have that to worry about anymore, once I’m back to living a *real* life, on my own terms, then I’ll think about what sort of life I should be living. Then I’ll have time to think things over and make amends.”

All that mattered was staying alive.

And killing youma and putting people to the sword.

“For the time being, I don’t have a choice. The only thing worth thinking about is getting to En as quickly as possible, no time for detours. If I can get to En, then at least I’ll be able to face my enemies and settle things without using a sword.”

So once you get to En, you think all your troubles will go away?

“Not likely, but I’ve got to find Keiki. I’ve got to find a way home. There will be plenty of other things to think about then.”

You still think Keiki is your ally? Really?

“I’ll decide when we meet. I’m not dwelling on it in the meantime.”

Even if you do meet Keiki, you’re not going home.

“Until I know that for certain, I’m not giving up.”

You want to go home that badly? Nobody is waiting for you.

“I don’t care. I’m going home.”

Back in her old world, Youko had conducted her life based on what she saw in

other people's faces. She lived to be liked by everyone and disliked by no one. Confrontation terrified her. The thought of being scolded scared her to death. After this, she didn't think anything would be very frightening.

Or perhaps it had never been about cowardice at all. Perhaps she had simply been lazy. It was easier to do as other people said than think for herself. Rather than go to the wall for somebody or something, it was easier to go along and avoid confrontation. Being the good girl everybody wanted her to be was easier than following her own mind and taking things on as they came. She had lived a lazy, cowardly life. That was why she wanted to go back. If she went home now, she could make a different life for herself. She at least wanted the chance to try.

She quietly pondered these thoughts as she walked along.

The rains increased. It may have been the rainy season. Camping outdoors was a pain when it rained so she often stopped at one of the secluded hamlets along the way and asked for shelter.

There were those who would let her stay in the corner of a barn and those who wanted money. There were those who called the constables on her, as well as those who looked in the mood to give her a good beating and throw her out in the street. On the other hand, there were those who, despite their meager circumstances, would give her a meal to eat.

Along the way she figured out she could work in exchange for a night's room and board. In exchange for lodging, she'd put herself in the employ of that family. She found herself all types of jobs. She worked in the fields, cleaned houses, did odd jobs, looked after livestock and mucked out the sties, dug graves, and anything else that came down the pike.

Thanks to these jobs, she got herself a bed for the night and put aside a bit of money as well.

She wandered from hamlet to hamlet, picking up work along the way. If trouble presented itself, she drew her sword and got out of there. If somebody called the constables, everybody would get skittish for a while and it was back to roughing it until things cooled down. She was often attacked by youma, their numbers increasing bit by bit, but she was also getting used to fighting her enemies.

She'd been traveling for a month when she spotted what seemed to be a bunch of gendarmes coming up the road after her. If she sought lodging, she'd leave a trail that could be tracked. She couldn't go leaving her calling card behind while she was being pursued or they would catch up with her eventually. But she knew all this and didn't let it knock her off her game.

She headed up into the mountains and managed to shake them. After that she saw soldiers on the road more and more often.

The only thing that concerned her was Agan getting locked down in the meantime. When she got closer to Agan, she did without lodging. She separated herself from the main road and became more careful about attracting unwanted attention, forging through the mountains instead.

Rakushun had said that it was a month's walk to Agan. By the time the harbor came into view, a full two months had passed.

Chapter 47

[6-3] Before the gates of Agan, Youko flagged down a fellow traveler. “Um, excuse me.”

The city of Agan was situated on the slopes of a hilly terrain. Descending the road that wound down from the highlands, the Port of Agan came into view.

The so-called Blue Sea really was blue, the waves breaking white on the shore. Within the embrace of the peninsula that encircled the Agan coast, white sails floated on the blue, transparent sea. Beyond the peninsula she could see the unbroken horizon. How this world could be flat was a mystery to her.

A number of roads came together at the gates of Agan. The city was big, and a great many people were going in and coming out. She slipped in amongst the crowds and called out to what looked like a good-natured person.

“Excuse me, but could you tell me how to get a ship to En?”

The middle-aged man politely instructed her. She also inquired about the price of a ticket. She’d managed to scrape together enough money during her journey to get her to En.

“When does the next ship depart?”

“A passenger ship leaves every five days. The next one is three days from today.”

Youko confirmed the ship’s departure time. If she messed this up and the harbor got closed down, it’d all be for naught. She asked about everything she thought she might need to know, and then bowed. “Thank you very much. You’ve been a great help.”

She left Agan at once and spent the next two days in the mountains. The ship was scheduled to leave in the morning. The day before she again went to the gates of Agan.

The guards were on their toes. Because she would have to spend the night in the town, she couldn’t do anything to attract any suspicion. Youko looked at her

sword, wrapped up in its cloth shroud. Now at least she had the scabbard. Still, she didn't see many travelers wearing swords on their belts, so it wouldn't do to stand out in the crowd.

If not for the sword, the risk here would be less. She'd given much thought to discarding the sword here in Kou, but even if she could, she had no desire to. As long as she was being pursed by the youma, it was necessary for her survival. It just wasn't a sword the guards were on the lookout for, so she didn't think getting rid of it would by itself improve her situation.

She cut some long grass in the mountains and wrapped the sword up in a bundle that, at a glance, would not be taken for a sword. Toward evening, she crouched on the road holding the bundle and waited for the right opportunity.

Soon after she sat down, she heard a man's voice. "Hey, kid, what's the problem?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just my foot acting up."

The man gave her a suspicious look and hurried on toward Agan. She watched him leave and continued to sit there. After the third such inquiry, she spotted the kind of companions she was looking for, a man and wife with two children. "What's the matter?" she was asked.

"I guess I'm not feeling very well."

Youko didn't look up as she spoke. The woman reached out and touched her. "Are you all right?"

Youko only shook her shoulders. If this didn't work, if she couldn't gin up some sympathy for her plight, she'd have to dump the sword and risk the consequences. The strain was enough to make her break out in a real sweat.

"Are you sick? You're almost to Agan. Can you walk that far?"

Youko nodded slightly. The man put his arm around her. "Well, then, hold on. It's only a little further. You can make it."

Youko nodded again and put her hand on his shoulder. When she stood up, she intentionally let the bundle fall to the ground. When she stooped to get it, the woman picked it up for her and said to the children. "Why don't you carry

this. It's not heavy."

She handed it to the boy and his younger sister. They took it with a serious looks on their faces.

"Can you walk? We can summon the guards, if you'd like."

Youko shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'll be okay. My friends already went ahead and are getting a room."

The man laughed. "Is that so? You've got somebody with you, that's great."

Youko nodded, clinging gently to the man's shoulder as they walked along. She intended to appear beholdng to the man helping her, while garnering as much sympathy as possible from the people around them.

They drew nearer to the gates. The guards flanking the gates were inspecting the stream of people hurrying toward them. She passed through the gates. She felt eyes on her, but no one raised his voice. After putting a bit of distance between her and the gates, Youko finally allowed herself to breathe. When she peeked back over her shoulder, the gates were far enough away that she could not make out the faces of the guards.

Score.

Sighing with relief, Youko took her hand off the man's shoulder. "Thank you. I'm feeling much better."

"Will you be okay? We can take you as far as the inn."

"That's okay. I'll be fine from here. I'm really grateful for your help."

She bowed deeply. *I apologize for lying to you*, she said in her heart.

The man and wife exchanged glances. "Take care," they said.

The city was bustling with refugees. Worried about falling under the wary eye of an innkeeper, she found an open space along the city walls and spent the night there.

The welcome morning finally came. Youko followed the city streets to the harbor. The streets opened up as she approached the water, ending at a shabby wharf. A ship was tied up at the pier. It looked rather small to Youko's eyes, but

it was bigger than all the other ships lying at anchor.

“There it is . . .”

As the wharf grew nearer, a flood of emotions filled her chest. She stopped. Soldiers were inspecting the line of passengers boarding the ship. For a moment everything went dark. They were searching the passengers’ luggage as well.

She had no desire to get rid of the sword. She’d managed to get this close staying in the shadows, and could get no closer. Youko stared at the guards and passengers.

Do I lose the sword?

She’d lose her primary means of defense but it was better than staying behind in Kou. Yet thinking this, seeing the water not far from where she stood, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. The sword was her link to Keiki. Lose it and she’d sever the half of her connection to him. It’d be the same as severing her ties to home.

What to do?

She turned the question over and over in her mind and could not come to a decision. She looked around the harbor. Was there any way to get to En and keep the sword? Several small boats were moored there. Could she steal one of them?

I haven’t the slightest idea how to sail a boat.

She’d heard that the Blue Sea was an inland sea. So while she couldn’t imagine how long it would take, she ought to be able to make it to En by following the shoreline. Dazed by the tumult of her own thoughts, she suddenly heard the loud pounding of a drum. She looked up, startled. The sound was coming from the deck of the ship. It was the signal that the ship would soon be departing. The line of passengers was gone. The soldiers were standing idly by.

I’m not going to make it.

Even if she made a run for it now, the guards would grab her. There wasn’t enough time to undo the bundle and take out the sword. And if she dumped everything, it would look equally suspicious trying to board a ship without any

luggage at all. Frozen with indecision, she watched as the ship raised its sail.

The gangplank was withdrawn. Youko jumped out from her hiding place. The ship edged slowly away from the pier, where the guards stood observing the departure. She ran toward it, but could not risk getting any closer. She watched dumbfounded as the ship set sail. The image of the white sails burned into her retinas.

If I do it now, I can jump.

Ideas raced through her head, but she could not act on any of them.

That's my ticket out of here.

Hugging the bundle to her chest, eyes wide, she could do nothing but watch the ship sail away. So much had depended on her making this escape, and she didn't think she would recover from the shock.

"What's the matter?" a rough voice said. "Miss your ride?"

Youko started, the gravelly voice bringing herself back to her senses. Down where the piles of the wharf were driven into the earth, she saw a vessel. Four men were working on the deck. One of them was looking up at her.

Youko nodded stiffly. The next ship wasn't for five more days. Those five days would probably settle her fate.

"Well, come on, kid. You want a ride or no?"

For a moment, Youko didn't grasp what he was saying and only stared.

"Hurry up, then. You got other plans?"

Youko shook her head. The sailor grabbed hold of the rope tied to the bollard next to her. "Loosen that up there and jump aboard. We'll catch up with them at Fugou. But you've got to work for your passage."

The other sailors thought that was a pretty funny offer. Youko nodded as resolutely as she could. She undid the rope from the bollard and, holding it tightly, jumped down onto the deck.

It was a cargo ship that went as far as the island of Fugou, just north of Agan. It was a full twenty-four hours to Fugou. From Fugou to En there were no more

ports of call.

Save a ferry ride on a school field trip once, Youko had never been on a boat. And this was certainly the first time in her life she'd been on a sailing vessel.

She had no idea what she was doing, but every time one of the sailors barked at her she hauled something here or straightened up something there and generally chased her own tail around the ship. When they left the coast and the ship settled into its course, she found herself being told to do this, that, and the other thing, from scrubbing the dishes to cooking dinner.

Finally, they even had her massaging the legs of some old salt of a first mate. Whenever anybody asked her about herself, she mumbled a half-hearted reply and they laughed about how she was a reticent little brat but thankfully didn't pry any more into her affairs.

The ship sailed on through the night without rest, and arrived at Fugou harbor the next morning.

The ship bound for En had already arrived and was resting quietly in its berth. The sailors worked Youko right up to the last minute. At last, not even coming into dock, they brought the boat alongside the passenger ship and called out to one of the seamen and requested that Youko be allowed to come aboard. Clinging to a pole that was lowered to the boat, she was hauled onto the ship. Coming aboard, somebody threw a small parcel up onto the deck.

"Some dumplings for you. Put a little meat on your bones."

One of the sailors on the boat waved to her. Youko picked up the parcel and waved back. "Thank you."

"You're a good worker. Take care, now."

They laughed goodheartedly. The men hauling up the fender^[16]—Youko had been the one who'd lowered it—were the last people she saw as she left Kou.

Chapter 48

[6-4] The inner sea was so wide that Youko could not see the opposing shore. Standing on the deck, breathing in the salt spray, it looked like a perfectly normal sea. The ship left Fugou and crossed the bright blue water, heading north to Ugou as the bird flies. From Fugou to Ugou it was a journey of three days and two nights.

When the coast of En first came into view, it looked no different than Kou. But as the ship drew closer, the differences became apparent. A well-maintained harbor and the huge city looming up behind it. Ugou was bigger than any city Youko had seen in Kou. Save for the buildings, she could have been looking at a city in Japan. It was obvious that a fair percentage of the passengers gathered on the deck were seeing Ugou for the first time too. Along with Youko they stared in amazement.

The city was set off to the side of the harbor, surrounded by walls that enclosed the city in the shape of a “U.” The city wound leisurely up the side of the facing mountains. In the distance, the richly-colored architectural decor ran together into a subdued, rosy hue. Around the circumference of the city and about its center, she observed tall, finely-built stone buildings. One was a clock tower, and her eyes opened wide as she saw it.

The harbor was developed to a degree with which Agan could not compare. The number of ships lying at anchor far outstripped those at Agan. The harbor was alive and bustling. The masts stood together like trees. The furled sails—white and faded and ruddy brown—accented the gorgeous panorama. Having finally arrived here after escaping such a harsh country, Youko took in the scenery like it was the most stunning spectacle in the world.

Descending from the ship, Youko looked out over the throngs. This was a city that left its inhabitants in good spirits. The faces of the people streaming by were full of vitality and life. Her own face was likely the same. Down on the dock, Youko found herself in the midst of bedlam. Men working madly, children running around doing heavens knows what, the voices of people and peddlers, thrumming together in a frenzied rhythm.

She was standing there on the pier when the voice called out to her.

“Youko?”

Her head snapped around at the sound of a voice she could not have possibly expected. She saw the charcoal-gray coat, fine whiskers gleaming silver in the light of the midday sun.

“Rakushun . . .”

The rat pushed his way through the crowds to Youko’s side. With his small, pink paw he grabbed the bewildered Youko by the hand. “This is so great. You arrived safely.”

“How . . . ?”

“Take a ship from Agan and you’re bound to arrive in Ugou. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“For me?”

Rakushun nodded. He tugged on Youko’s hand. She was still frozen with surprise.

“I waited for a while at Agan. When you didn’t turn up, I thought maybe you’d gone on ahead of me. But there was neither hide nor hair of you here. So I decided that every time a ship came into port, I’d come down and look for you. I figured you might have gotten delayed, but made it through just the same.”

The rat looked up at Youko and smiled.

“But why, for me?”

Rakushun rounded his back and bowed his head. “I wasn’t thinking. I should have let you have the money, at least half. You must have had a rough time of it getting here. I’m sorry about that.”

“But . . . *I’m* the one who ran off and left you behind.”

“I blame myself for that as well. I messed up.” The rat smiled bitterly. “And a good thing you did run. If the guards arrested you, then what? Better if I had told you myself and given you the purse, but I kind of got myself knocked out cold.”

“Rakushun . . .”

“I was really worried about what happened to you after that. I’m glad to see you’re okay.”

“It’s not like I abandoned you because I had to.”

“Really?”

“Really. The idea of traveling with another person gave me the willies. I didn’t think I could trust anybody. I thought I was surrounded by no one but my enemies. That’s why.”

Rakushun twitched his whiskers. “Does that include me now?”

Youko shook her head.

“All’s well, then. Well, let’s get going.”

“Don’t you hate me for double-crossing you?”

“I might think you a fool for doing so, but no. I don’t have any particular reason to hate you.”

“I even thought of going back and killing you.”

Rakushun started to walk off, still holding her hand. He stopped in his tracks. “You know, Youko . . .”

“Yes.”

“To tell the truth, when I realized that you had gone off and left me there, I was a little let down. Only a little. I knew you didn’t trust me. You were worried the whole time I was going to try and pull something. Still, along the way, I hoped the truth would sink in. When you ran off without me, I knew it hadn’t. So I was a little disappointed. But if you’ve finally come to your senses, then it’s all good.”

“It’s not all good. You’ve got every reason in the world to tell me good riddance and send me packing.”

“Whether I do or not, that’s up to me, isn’t it? I wished for you to trust me. If you do, then that makes me happy. If not, then not so much. But that’s *my* problem. Whether you trust me or not, that’s up to you. Trusting me may be to

your benefit or to your loss. But that's *your* problem."

Youko humbly bowed her head. "Rakushun, you're—*awesome!*"

"Hey, hey, what's this all of a sudden?"

"It's just that I get myself into these snits and convince myself that I have no friends in this world."

"Youko." Rakushun tugged on her arm with his small hand.

"I am so totally messed up."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"You're not, Youko. After all, I'm not the one who was washed ashore in a strange land and then chased around it from one end to the other."

For a moment Youko stared down at Rakushun's face. Rakushun looked up at her and laughed. "You've really pulled yourself together, Youko. You're in a fine fettle."

"What?"

"I knew it as soon as you came off the boat. A blind man couldn't miss it a mile away."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. So, shall we get going?"

"Go where?"

"The prefecture building. If you're a kaikyaku and get yourself properly registered, people will do what they can to help. The officials will write letters of introduction for you, or so I've heard. You were taking your time getting here, so I did a bit of wandering about myself and went to the local prefecture building and checked it out. That's what they told me."

"Rakushun, you're unbelievable."

For whatever reason, one by one, doors now seemed to be opening up to her.

Chapter 49

[6-5] Youko said, “This is one happening town.”

The crowds of people bustling back and forth and proprietors shouting out their wares from the storefronts only added to the lively atmosphere.

“You’re surprised.”

“Yeah.”

“I’d heard that En was a wealthy kingdom, but when I saw Ugou for the first time, even I was taken aback.”

Youko nodded. The streets were wide in the same way that the dimensions of the whole city were big. The castle walls that surrounded the city had to be a good ten meters thick. On the city-side of the walls, shop stalls had been hollowed-out of the stone and businesses were thriving there as well. They very much resembled under-girder^[17] kiosks in Japan.

The buildings were made of wood and reached three stories. The ceilings were high and every window was glazed with glass. Here and there was a huge building made of brick and stone. A “Chinatown-like atmosphere” by itself was not enough to describe the strange and curious ambience the place created. The streets were paved with stone, with drainage ditches running down both sides. There was a park and public square. None of this had she ever seen in Kou.

Youko said, looking at her surroundings, “I feel like a country bumpkin.”

Rakushun laughed. “I thought the same. And I *am* a country bumpkin.”

“Just how many layers of fortifications are there?”

“Eh?”

Youko pointed out to Rakushun where the high walls could be seen here and there rising above the surrounding houses and stores.

“Well, technically, a city’s outer walls are called the *ramparts*, and the inner wall protecting the keep is called the *bailey*. In Kou, cities with baileys are rare. Those are probably the remnants of an old rampart left over from when the city

grew bigger and expanded beyond it.”

“Wow.”

Refugees from Kei were camped out at the foot of the ramparts and in the plaza, in neat and tidy rows of similar-looking tents that gave no indication of disorder. According to Rakushun, the tents were also provisioned by the local government.

“So, is this a provincial capital?”

“No, a prefectural seat.”

“The prefecture is one step below a province?”

“Two steps below. Starting with hamlets of twenty-five households, it goes, from smallest to largest: hamlet, town, township, county, prefecture, district, province. A district consists of fifty-thousand households.”

“How many districts are in a province?”

“It depends on the location.”

“If this is a prefectural seat, then district and provincial capitals must be huge.”

According to official designations, a district capital was a city that was home to a district administration, also called a district seat. For administrative purposes, districts were designated as having populations of fifty thousand households, though that didn’t necessarily mean that fifty thousand people lived in a single district. Generally speaking, in terms of urbanization, a town was bigger than a hamlet, a district capital bigger than a county seat, the capital of a province bigger than a district capital.

“How is it that En and Kou can be this different?”

Rakushun answered with a thin smile. “The difference is in the characters of the rulers.”

“The difference in their characters?”

Rakushun glanced back at her and nodded. “The Imperial En is an unusually enlightened monarch. He’s said to have reigned for five hundred years. The Imperial Kou has been around for at most fifty years. He’s hardly in the same

league.”

Youko blinked. “Five *hundred* years?”

“Exceeded only by the Imperial Sou of the Kingdom of Sou. It’s said that the longer an emperor rules, the more enlightened his governance becomes. Sou is also a wealthy country.”

“A single emperor reigns for five *hundred* years?”

“Of course. Emperors are gods, not ordinary human beings. The degree to which Heaven allows an emperor to govern is commensurate with the caliber of the ruler. So, the better an emperor rules, the longer he will reign.”

“Huh.”

“A kingdom undergoing a change of regimes always falls into chaos. A kingdom with a wise ruler prospers. In particular, the Imperial En has proved to be a shrewd reformer. And speaking of enlightened monarchs, the Imperial Sou is said to be one too. He’s made the Kingdom of Sou a place of peace and tranquility. En, on the other hand, is, as you say, a *happening* place.”

“It is, indeed.”

“No doubt about it. Oh, here’s the prefecture building.”

Rakushun pointed to a large brick building. The walls and eaves were decorated after a Chinese fashion, and though the architecture was in the “western” style, the combination did not clash. The interior decor was similarly a potpourri of Occidental and Oriental tastes.

The first thing Youko said after they left was, “This place is incredible.”

Rakushun nodded. “I always knew that Kou was hard on kaikyaku, but I wouldn’t have believed that En was this different.”

Youko agreed. She examined the wooden card she’d been given by the administrator. On the front was a red seal and beneath it in black ink, “Conferred in Ugou, Tei Province, Haku District, Shuuyou Prefecture.” On the back was her name. Her identification card.

The clerk had asked Youko for her name, her address in Japan, her occupation and other details, including, most surprisingly, her postal code and area code,

before handing over the identification card.

“By the way, Youko, um, what are postal codes and area codes?”

The official had asked the same question as Rakushun. Apparently he didn’t know either. “Just following regulations,” he said, opening a volume in a set of books. Sneaking a peek at the Japanese-style bound volume, Youko saw that it contained rows of numbers printed with woodblock characters. Only after referencing one of the volumes did he hand over the card.

“A postal code, or zip code, is a number you put at the end of an address when you mail a letter. An area code is the number you dial when you call somebody on the telephone outside your local calling area.”

“Telephone?”

“Um, it’s a gizmo that transmits your voice a long distance so you can talk to people.”

“To think they have such things in Japan. But why would he ask about it?” Rakushun quivered his whiskers.

“Probably because someone who wasn’t Japanese wouldn’t know such a thing. Makes it easy to tell who is a kaikyaku and who’s not. Otherwise, you’d have people pretending to be kaikyaku all over the place.” Youko grinned and showed him her card.

“Yeah, that must be it.”

This card was proof of her bona fides, but it was good for only three years. In three years it was expected that she would find a livelihood, at which time she would settle on a permanent place of residency and be officially recorded on the census. In exchange, during her three years as a ward of the state, she would have free access to the local community colleges and hospitals. Not only that, if she took her identification card to a kind of bank called a trade credit union, she could collect a stipend to cover her living expenses.

“What a country!”

“Yes, indeed.”

Kou was so much poorer, En so much richer. If nothing else, that’s what the

card taught them.

The Imperial En should by no means be an unapproachable individual. Rakushun said she should ask him for help. She still had her doubts about the likelihood of that ever happening. She had her doubts about a lot of things, but felt more confident that she wouldn't be rejected out of hand or summarily punished for making the attempt.

Chapter 50

[6-6] As Rakushun had predicted, many beasts mingled in with the crowds on the streets. Amidst the hustle and bustle, there was something unbearably cute about these animals walking about on their two hind legs. Some were even dressed like people. Youko had to try hard not to giggle.

While he was waiting for her, Rakushun had gotten work at the harbor doing maintenance on the ships coming into port. He told her enthusiastically all about it.

Still, he took the occasion of meeting up with Youko to quit his first job ever. When she insisted that it was all right with her to stay a while longer in Ugou while he gave his notice, Rakushun said that when he signed up, he had told the foreman that he only wanted to work until the person he was waiting for arrived, so it was no big deal.

The day after Youko arrived, they set forth for Kankyuu. Though her stipend was by no means exceedingly generous, it wasn't a miserly amount, and they could afford to take things easy. They walked along the highway during the day. At night they stopped in at a city and found an inn. All of the cities in En were big. For the same fee they got that much more than a comparable inn in Kou. They'd arrive at dusk, arrange for lodgings, and then go sightseeing. Rakushun particularly liked checking out what the shops had on display.

It was an uneventful trip. Nobody came chasing after her, though it took her some time to train herself not to recoil every time she saw a guard or constable. They never left the cities at night so she couldn't confirm this for herself, but from what she gathered from conversations with other travelers, hardly anybody encountered a youma, even when traveling at night.

They were in the middle of their journey, eleven days out from Ugou and about a third of the way to Kankyuu. That evening, Youko decided to take a bath. Rakushun went out for a stroll to give her some privacy. That was when he heard about another kaikyaku.

Rakushun had pointed out that because they were in En, it'd be okay to show

herself off a bit more. But Youko preferred men's clothing, specifically a jacket or tunic called a *hou*. It was more comfortable, and having gotten used to it, she had no desire to put on a woman's long kimono.

So, of course, everybody took her for a boy. This made using public baths a pain. The inns in En often had a *furo*, but they were more like a communal sauna, so she made do by bathing in their room. Because they had money to spare, even after taking care of their travel expenses, they always got a room. Still, it seemed a bit pointless since they settled for one room, and whenever Youko took a bath she kicked Rakushun out. Rakushun must have found it annoying.

She filled a basin with hot water and washed her hair. She hadn't been in this world very long when Takki dyed her hair. As the days and months passed, her hair had grown out. Takki made the dye from roots in her garden. Copying what she had observed Takki do, Youko had searched for the same kind of roots. Through trial and error, she was able to fashion a dye of sorts. But the species of root or the process itself was wrong because the dye washed out afterwards.

At this point, her hair wasn't so different from its original red. She was getting used to the strange color. She still got an odd vibe when looking at herself in the mirror, but the visage wasn't unbearable. She bathed and dressed, all the more aware that she was getting used to this life.

When Rakushun got back, he told her about the kaikyaku. "It seems there's a kaikyaku living in Houryou, the local prefectural seat. It's along the way."

Youko raised her eyes for a moment and then looked away. "Oh, really."

She didn't want to meet him. And even if she did, the thought of hanging out with a fellow countryman and getting all depressed was even more painful.

"They say he goes by the name of Hekirakujin."

"That's Heki Rakujin^[18]?"

"Yeah. He's something like a professor at a prefectural college."

That being the case, he wouldn't be the old man who had ripped her off. And when she thought it through, it wasn't likely she would run into him here. But that was only a minor comfort.

“Shall we go and see him?” Rakushun looked at Youko with hopeful eyes.

“Well, it’d probably be a good idea.”

“Then you’ll go?”

“Sure . . . I guess.”

The next day, they departed from the road to Kankyuu and headed to Houryuu to visit the school.

Shire-level preparatory schools here were called *jogaku* and prefectural academies were called *shougaku*. In En, students aiming for a district academy (*joushou*) could do their preparatory work at a prefectural academy, or could attend a prefectural polytechnic college (*shoujo*). This “Professor Heki” they were visiting taught at such a shoujo. He lived in a compound at the school.

Dropping in on a professor out of the blue was bad manners. Following formal procedures, a letter was sent and an interview requested. The reply from Heki Rakujin arrived at their inn the next morning. The courier bearing the reply accompanied them to the school.

The school in Houryou was located within the inner bailey wall of the city, built in the archetypal Chinese style. With its expansive gardens, the school more resembled a wealthy estate than a school. They were led to a small gazebo to wait. The next person they saw was Heki Rakujin.

He said, “Please excuse the delay. I am Heki.”

His age was hard to tell. He seemed both old and young. *Older than thirty, younger than fifty*, Youko thought. A gentle smile came easily to his smooth, unwrinkled face. He had a completely different air about him than that old man, Seizou Matsuyama.

“Did you receive our letter?” Rakushun asked. “We, um, thank you so very much for sparing a few moments of your precious time.”

Rakujin smiled at Rakushun’s overly polite language. “Relax. Make yourselves at home.”

“Um . . . ” Rakushun scratched at the bottom of his ear. He looked at Youko. “This is the kaikyaku.”

The man responded at once to Rakushun's introduction. "Of course. But she doesn't look like a kaikyaku to me." He turned to Youko.

"I suppose I don't."

He laughed. "I can't say I ever saw that color of hair in Japan."

"Um . . ."

Responding to the inquiring look in his eyes, Youko explained her predicament. Why, she didn't know, but since coming here she had changed like this. It wasn't only the color of her hair. Her face, body, even her voice had changed.

When she finished talking, Rakujin nodded. "That means you're a *taika*."

"Me?" Youko's eyes opened wide. "A *taika*?"

"During a shoku, here and there get mixed up together. People come here and *ranka* go there."

"I don't get it."

"When a person in Japan or China is caught up in a shoku, they are brought here. In the same way, a *ranka* sometimes get swept into that other world. A *ranka* is like an embryo. In the other world, a *ranka* can become embedded in a woman's womb. The child that is subsequently born is called a *taika*."

"That's what you're saying I am?"

Rakujin nodded. "A *taika* is a being of this world, the way you appear now. It is the form bestowed upon you by Tentei."

"But when I was over there."

"If you had been born the way you are now, it would have caused quite an uproar. You do probably resemble your parents."

"Yes. People say I look like my grandmother on my father's side."

"It is a shell, so to speak. A second skin grows within the womb so that those born in that other world may pass as normal. I've heard that a *taika*'s appearance can be transfigured in such a manner."

Youko struggled to make sense of what he was telling her. He was telling her that in Japan she had been a stranger in a strange land all along. She accepted

that fact without objection. There was definitely a part of her that said, *Yes. Of course.*

She didn't belong to that other world. That was why she had never felt at home there. She found the thought very comforting. And at the same time, very sad.

Chapter 51

[6-7] Youko was caught up in her thoughts for a moment, thinking about herself and her place in the world. She turned to Rakujin. “Are you a taika too, Professor?”

He shook his head and smiled. “Just an ordinary kaikyaku. I grew up in Shizuoka and attended Tokyo University. I came here when I was twenty-two. I was trying to sneak out of Yasuda Hall by crawling under one of the desks barricading the entrance. The next thing I knew, I was in this world.”

“Yasuda Hall?”

“Do you know about it? It was a big deal at the time^[19]. Perhaps by now it has been consigned to the musty pages of history.”

“Just because I don’t know something . . . ”

“The same applies to me. It took place on January 17th, 1969. Night had fallen. What happened after that I don’t know.”

“It all took place before I was born.”

A wry smile came to his face. “How the years have gone by. I have been here a long time.”

“You’ve been here ever since then?”

“I have. I arrived in Kei. Six years ago, I moved from Kei and settled in En. As for my line of work, I’m what you might call a science teacher.” He smiled and shook his head. “It’s not important. Now, what did you wish to ask me?”

Youko came right to the point. “There’s a way to go home, isn’t there?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Rakujin lowered his voice. “No mortal being can cross the Kyokai. It is a one-way trip. Once you get here, you cannot go back.”

Youko took a breath. “Is that so?” But it didn’t hit her as hard as she had expected.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help to you.”

“No, that’s okay. I had another question. It’s a bit strange, though.”

“Go ahead.”

“I understand what people say here.”

Rakujin tilted his head to the side quizzically.

“I didn’t notice at first. I thought everyone was speaking Japanese. The only thing I didn’t understand were unique words and terms. And then I met this old kaikyaku in Kou. For the first time I realized that nobody was speaking Japanese. Yet I have no problem communicating, even though I only speak Japanese. What could account for this?”

Rakujin looked inquiringly at Rakushun. When Rakushun confirmed what she was saying, he thought it over for a minute.

“It would seem that you are not human.”

I knew that, Youko thought.

“When I arrived, it was hard because I didn’t understand a thing. I thought the language was similar to Chinese, but the few words of Chinese I knew did me little good. For many years, I had to communicate in writing^[20]. I managed to get by using classical Chinese. Even that was chancy, which made my first year here very difficult. That’s been true of everybody who comes here. Taika are no different. I’ve done my own research on kaikyaku. Every one of them has had real difficulty with the language. You are no ordinary kaikyaku.”

Youko unconsciously gripped her arms. Rakujin continued.

“From what I’ve heard, only wizards and magical beings such as youma don’t encounter this hurdle of language. If you didn’t perceive a language difference, you can’t be human. You must be of the same species as wizards or youma.”

“So . . . there are also youma taika?”

Rakujin nodded. The smile didn’t disappear from his face. “I’ve never heard of it but it is possible. Maybe there is a solution to your predicament after all. Perhaps you can go back.”

Youko lifted her head. “Do you really think so?”

“Perhaps. Youma and wizards can cross the Kyokai. It is not something I can do. I cannot go home again. You may be different. You should definitely request an audience with the Imperial En.”

“If we meet with the emperor, would he be able to help us?”

“Most likely. It won’t be simple and the rewards may be slim, but it would certainly be worth trying.”

“Yeah.” Nodding her head, Youko cast her eyes down to the floor. “It all makes sense. I’m not a human being.” She smiled to herself.

Rakushun raised his voice sharply. “Youko.”

She drew back her sleeve, showing her right hand. “I always thought this was odd. There should be a scar in the palm of my hand, a wound I got after coming here and being attacked by the youma. It was a deep wound that went straight through my hand. Now, I can barely see it.”

Rakushun gently unfolded her hand and examined her palm. He quivered his whiskers. This was the wound Rakushun had tended to himself. He could testify to the fact that it was indeed a serious injury.

“I should have a lot of other scars but you’d never know it. The wounds themselves are very light for being inflicted by youma. No fang marks remain where I was bitten. For some reason, my body has become very resilient to injury.”

Youko had to smile. The realization that she was not human struck her as rather amusing. “Because I’m a youma, don’t you see? That’s why they hunt me and attack me.”

Rakujin frowned. “Youma hunt you?”

Rakushun answered for her. “It sure looks that way to me.”

“That’s absurd.”

“That’s what I thought. Except wherever Youko goes, youma are bound to show up. I was there when we were attacked by a kochou.”

Rakujin lightly pressed his hand against his forehead. “Recently, there have been rumors of youma appearing more often in Kou. Are you saying it is because

of her?”

Rakushun looked hesitantly at Youko. Youko nodded and picked up the story. “I think so, too. The reason I ended up here in the first place is because I was attacked by a kochou and had to escape.”

“You escaped to this world after being attacked by a kochou? From that other world to here?”

“Yes. A guy named Keiki—and I’m pretty sure he’s a youma, too—he said it was in order to protect me. He’s the one who brought me here.”

“And where he is now?”

“I don’t know. When we arrived, we were ambushed by youma and got split up. I haven’t seen him since. He could be dead.”

Rakujin again rested his fist against his forehead and thought for a long time. “That’s impossible. I simply cannot imagine.”

“That’s what Rakushun said.”

“Youma are a species of wild animal. They’ve been known to hunt humans in packs, but they wouldn’t track down a particular individual. Needless to say, they wouldn’t cross the Kyokai to do so. It is not in their nature, the same way you wouldn’t expect it of a tiger.”

“Couldn’t a person train a tiger to do something like that?”

“Youma cannot be domesticated. You are speaking of something quite grave, Miss Youko.”

“It’s that serious?”

“If we suppose that some kind of change was effected in the youma to cause them to attack you, or if we suppose that someone found a way to control and command them, either way, standing idly by and doing nothing could put the kingdom in jeopardy.”

Rakujin looked at Youko. “Now, if we supposed that you *were* a youma, that would simplify things greatly. I have heard of youma being separated from their packs. When they come close to starving, they are the kind of beast that will feed even upon their own kind.”

“Youko doesn’t look like a youma,” Rakushun said.

Rakujin nodded. “There are youma who can disguise themselves as humans but not perfectly. And to not be aware of their youma nature themselves . . .”

Youko smiled thinly. “That doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

Rakujin shook his head. “No, you are different. You are no youma. It cannot be.”

With that, Rakujin stood up. “You should see the emperor at once. I am on speaking terms with some officials in the government, but it would be more expeditious for you to go directly to Kankyuu. Visit Gen’ei Palace straightaway and tell them exactly what you told me. You are the key to the whole thing. I’m sure the emperor will want to see you.”

Youko also got to her feet. She bowed deeply. “I thank you very much”

“If you leave right away, you should arrive at the next city by nightfall. Do you have belongings at the inn?”

“No, we’ve got everything with us.”

“In that case, I will see you to the city gates.”

Rakujin walked with them to the gates. “It may not amount to much, but I shall work on a formal petition, as well. “Until they figure out what is going on, you may be detained. But once everything is put in order, I am sure the emperor will find a way home for you.”

Youko looked at Rakujin. “And you?”

“What’s that?”

“Do you also wish to petition the emperor to return to Japan?”

Rakujin smiled wryly. “I do not have the standing that would allow me to see the emperor. He is not some glad-hander who stoops to rubbing shoulders with run-of-the-mill kaikyaku.”

“But . . .”

“No. If I pleaded, yes, perhaps he might deign to see me. It’s simply not something I am interested in pursuing.”

“No interest at all?”

“I was tired of the times and was happy to come to this new world. I harbor no longings for my old country. By the time I understood that a way might be found to return if I petitioned the emperor, I’d gotten used to living here and lost any desire to go home.”

“I still want to,” Youko said to herself, feeling a strong stab of homesickness.

“Take care. I’ll pray for your successful audience with the emperor.”

“At the very least, we can talk about Japan on our way to the gates.”

“There is no need.” Rakujin laughed. “You see, that is the country I ran away from when I tried to start a revolution and failed.”

Part VII

Chapter 52

[7-1] Traveling the highway at a brisk pace, they made it to the next city just as the gates were being secured. The next morning they set off as soon as the gates opened. Youko still couldn't grasp the significance of what this was all about, but from the looks on the faces of both Rakujin and Rakushun, she knew it was serious.

She asked as they walked along, "I wonder if we'll really be able to see the Imperial En."

Rakushun quivered his whiskers. "Indeed. I've never had an audience with a emperor, so I'm hardly in the position to say. I doubt asking to see the emperor out of the blue like this is common practice."

"Yeah, you think?"

"When traveling to Kankyuu, there are also the county and prefectural governments to deal with. We should probably ask for a meeting with the *Taiho* first and see how that goes."

"Taiho?"

Rakushun nodded, with his forefoot tracing the spelling of the Chinese character in the air. "That's what the king's counselor, or Saiho, is called. A kind of honorary title. Kankyuu is in Sei Province, so the province lord of Sei is the Taiho."

Youko continued to stare at where Rakushun had written the characters in the air. She said, "That sounds familiar. I've heard that word before."

"No doubt you have."

"No, it was in the other world. A long time ago." She thought about it, when and where she had heard someone say, "Taiho." She said, "Oh, yeah, that's it! That's what they called Keiki."

Rakushun blinked his black eyes in surprise. “Taiho? Keiki?”

“Yeah. He’s the guy who brought me here. He gave me this sword.” Youko laughed. “He kept going on about how he was my servant and that I was his lord and all. I’m telling you, he had this heavy-duty *attitude* about him.”

“Hold on a minute!” Rakushun frantically put up his hands and even with his tail dragged Youko to a stop. “*Keiki*, you said? They called Keiki the *Taiho*?”

“Yeah, I think so. Why, do you guys know each other?”

Rakushun shook his head vigorously. His whiskers fluttered up and down in great agitation. “You are Keiki’s lord . . .”

Man, it was so long ago, Youko thought to herself. She reached back through her memories like turning through the pages of a photo album. For a moment she was lost in her thoughts. When she came back to herself and sighed, she saw that Rakushun had taken several steps back and was staring at her. He looked totally freaked out.

“Hey, what’s with you?” Youko tilted her head the side, puzzled.

“What’s with me?” Rakushun said to himself. He looked up at her. “If your Keiki was addressed as *Taiho*, that makes him the Kei Taiho.”

“And that is?”

The thunderstruck expression on Rakushun’s face was quite extraordinary.

“So Keiki is the Kei Taiho. There something wrong with that?”

Rakushun sat down on the shoulder of the road and motioned for Youko to join him. Youko sat down next to him. For a while he just stared at her.

“So who is this Keiki? What kind of person is he?”

“This is really, really, *really* serious, Youko.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I’ll try to explain it to you. Keep calm and listen.”

Youko felt a growing sense of unease. She nodded and gave Rakushun her undivided attention.

“If I’d known that you were taking about the Taiho, the remarkable state of affairs we’ve found ourselves in could have been cleared up a lot quicker. You probably wouldn’t have had to suffer so much.”

“Rakushun, you’re not making any sense.”

“What I’m telling you is, the Taiho is an imperial counselor. *The* imperial counselor. And you say that his name is Keiki. That being the case, then it must be the Kei Taiho. There can be no other explanation.”

“Okay. So?”

Rakushun twitched his whiskers. He made as if to reach out with his forehand and touch Youko’s shoulder but thought better of it and held back.

“That means he’s not a person. He’s not a youma. He’s a . . . *kirin*.”

“A kirin?”

“A kirin. A unicorn. The unicorn is the most exalted of the sacred beasts. He can take on the shape of a human being, but the Taiho is not a human being. He is always a kirin. *Keiki* is written as the *Kirin* of *Kei*. That is not his name. It’s his title. The kirin of the Eastern Kingdom of Kei, it means.”

“Right.”

“Kei is on the eastern coast of the Blue Sea. It is situated between En and Kou. It has a temperate climate. It’s a good place to live.”

“But isn’t Kei in the middle of a civil war?”

Rakushun nodded. “Last year the emperor died. A new emperor has not ascended the throne. The emperor subdues the youma, reins in the supernatural forces, protects the kingdom from disasters. So when there is no emperor, the country descends into chaos.”

“Right.”

“If Keiki called you his lord, then you are the Empress of Kei.”

“The *what*?”

“The Empress of the Eastern Kingdom of Kei. The Imperial Kei.”

Youko was speechless with surprise. She couldn’t find the words to respond.

“You are the chosen ruler of Kei.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on a minute! I’m just an ordinary high school student. Okay, it looks like I’m a taika, but not some big, important person like that!”

“Every emperor is an ordinary person until he sits upon the throne. Our rulers are not chosen by heredity. The decision has nothing to do with a person’s resume or their outward appearance. The emperor is whomever the kirin chooses.”

“But, but, but . . .”

Rakushun shook his head. “If Keiki chose *you*, then you are the Imperial Kei. The kirin takes orders from no one in this regard. The only person the kirin calls *lord* is the emperor or empress.”

“This is all so stupid.”

“The branch of a tree is bestowed upon the emperor by Heaven. The three fruits on the branch represent the earth, the kingdom, and the throne. The earth is the census and the registry of public lands. The kingdom is the rule of law. And the throne symbolizes the justice and benevolence of the emperor, meaning the kirin.”

As he spoke, Rakushun glanced down the road toward their destination. “I can now see that you are different from ordinary people, even from ordinary taika. You have entered into the covenant with the kirin of Kei.”

“I’ve done what?”

“I don’t know the exact nature of the covenant. But an emperor is a god, not a person. From the moment you entered into the covenant with the kirin, you were no long a human being.”

Youko searched her memories. Her mind lit upon a memory. *Allow me*. “Yeah, Keiki did say something like: *Allow me*. That’s it. Then he did something weird and I got this really strange feeling inside.”

Thoughts raced through her head. That *feeling*. And right afterwards, the window exploding, the shards of glass flying around the vice-principal’s office. Everybody was injured except for her, and not a scratch on her.

“Something weird?”

“He knelt before me, bowed . . . touched his forehead to my feet.”

“That was it,” Rakushun declared. “Kirin are dignified and aloof. They obey no one but the emperor, bend a knee to no one but the emperor.”

“But . . .”

“I am not the one to fill you in on the details. You should be asking the Imperial En instead. I am nothing but a lowly hanjuu. I do not know anything about the Kingdom of Heaven.”

There was a hardness in his voice. He looked up at Youko. His whiskers wavered and drooped. “You are so far away from me, Youko.”

“I’m . . .”

“If it is true then I shouldn’t be the one telling you this. Youko, I shouldn’t even address you by your first name.” He got to his feet. “If this is true, the faster we see the Imperial En the better. Rather than heading to Kankyuu, it would be quicker if we reported in at the nearest municipal office. These are matters of the gravest importance.”

He was standing with his back to her. He turned to face her. “It has been a long journey and I know you must be tired. But rather than Kankyuu, I suggest we ask for asylum at one of the local government offices. Until we have received the official sanction of the Imperial En, we should sojourn at a local inn, if you please.”

He bowed low to the ground. It was a pitiful sight.

Youko said, “I am who I am.”

“That is indeed the truth.”

“I . . .” Her voice trembled with rage. “I am who I’ve always been, nothing more! Not once have I ever been anything other than myself. Call me king or kaikyaku, that has nothing to do with me! Rakushun, *you’re* the one I’ve come all this way with.”

Rakushun continued to hang his head, showing his sad, rounded back.

“So what’s different? Nothing’s changed! I thought I was your friend. If becoming empress is going to change that, then I don’t want any part of it!”

There was no answer from her small companion.

“Well, that’s discrimination, pure and simple. You didn’t discriminate against me because I was a kaikyaku. But now you do because I’m some sort of royalty?”

“Youko . . .”

“I’m not the one who’s far away. It’s your feelings that are. You and I are standing no more than two steps apart.”

She reached out with her foot and indicated the distance between them. *No further than that*, she meant.

Rakushun looked up at Youko. He worried at the fur on his chest with his forefoot, fluttered his silky whiskers.

“Am I wrong, Rakushun?”

“It’s three steps for me.”

Youko couldn’t help grinning.

“Forgive me.” Rakushun reached out with his forefoot and touched Youko’s hand. “I am sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m the one who should be sorry. I got you mixed up in all kinds of weird stuff.” She was being pursued. If Rakushun said she was an empress, then it was probably true. Her being chased probably had something to do with it.

Rakushun’s black eyes brimmed with laughter. “I came to En for my own reasons, so it’s nothing you need to blame yourself for.”

“Oh, I’ve caused you no end of trouble.”

“No trouble at all. If I thought you were trouble, I wouldn’t have stuck with you from the start. If it was so disagreeable, I would have gone home.”

“You even got injured on my account.”

“I knew there would be difficulties, I knew there would be dangers. But I figured sticking with you would be worth it so I stuck with you.”

“You are a good person, Rakushun.”

“I suppose. But I think I’m much better off heading into danger with you than playing it safe without you.”

“Oh, c’mon. You didn’t think things would get this chancy, did you?”

“In any case, my expectations were a bit uninformed. That’s my fault, not yours.”

Youko couldn’t think of a way to respond. She nodded. Holding his small hand, feelings of guilt and regret welled up inside her.

Rakushun had likely committed a crime by giving shelter to a kaikyaku. The youma pursuing her may well have attacked Rakushun’s home after she left. He’d said to his mother when they left, “You’re tough as nails, Mom. I’m sure you’ll be okay on your own.”

There was no escaping the implication in his reassurances that her attackers or some other calamity might soon be visited upon her.

Youko pulled him to her and clasped the soft, furry body against her own. She ignored Rakushun’s odd cries of protest and buried her head in the charcoal gray fur. It was as gentle and comforting as she imagined.

“I’m really am sorry for messing up your life like this. And really grateful.”

“Youko.”

She released the flustered Rakushun. “Sorry. I was a little overcome there.”

“It’s all right.” Rakushun awkwardly combed his ruffled fur back into place. “But it’d be better if you acted with a bit more restraint.”

“Eh?”

Rakushun’s whiskers drooped. “It looks like we need to study you up a bit more about this world. You think?”

He spoke in a concerned tone of voice. With no real idea what he was referring to, Youko could only nod and say, “Yeah. Sure.”

Chapter 53

[7-2] They stopped at the next city and got a room at an inn. As soon as Rakushun finished writing the letter, they rushed over to the municipal building.

If the letter was received, Rakushun said, a reply would be sent to the inn. Youko still was not convinced of the gravity of the situation, to say nothing of the complete lack of any feeling that there was anything “imperial” about her. But she didn’t stop Rakushun from doing what he was doing, and did as he asked with all due diligence.

“How long do you think it will take?”

“Hard to say. I’ve described our circumstances and requested an audience with the Saiho. I have no idea how long it will take to get his attention. We’re dealing with something I have no experience with.”

“Can’t we go grab a bureaucrat and do a lot of begging and pleading?”

Rakushun laughed. “Do something like that and they’ll throw us out on our butts.”

“And what if they ignore us?”

“We’ll keep on calling until they pay attention. This letter I’m sending gets straight to the point.”

“Do you really think they’ll go to the bother?”

“I don’t know of any other way.”

“This is all a pain in the ass.”

“We’re talking about the real important big shots, here. It’s their way or the highway.”

“Huh.”

Finding herself in the eye of a hurricane certainly gave her a different view of things.

After leaving the municipal building—it was the local county ward building—

instead of returning to the inn, Rakushun started off for the plaza.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. I think you will find it quite interesting.”

The municipal building was located in the heart of the city, facing the town plaza. Rakushun headed across the plaza. Youko tagged along behind him, scratching her head in confusion. Rakushun went to the front entrance of a white building. The alabaster stone walls were adorned with gold and richly-colored bas-relief engravings. The roof tile was gorgeous blue enamel. The name of the city was Youshou. On the gates to the building was hung a framed sign that read “Youshou Shrine.” All the cities they had visited so far had such a shrine. It was the central civic institution.

“Here?”

“Here is it.”

“A shrine, it says. For worshiping a god? The Tentei?”

“Once you see, you’ll understand.”

Rakushun gave her a reassuring smile. They went inside. Inside the gates were a pair of guards. “Just observing,” Rakushun said. They were asked for and presented their identification papers.

Through the gate was a narrow garden, and further on toward the heart of the shrine, a big building. The handiwork of the doors was exceedingly fine. A large, square window graced the facade of a rotunda-like hall that reached deeply into the building. Through the window a courtyard was visible.

What looked like an altar completely encircled the window. Flowers and candles and offerings were piled upon the altar. At the altar, four or five men and women faced the window, fervently praying.

They must be praying to something in the middle of the altar. But all that was there was the window. Was it something you could see from the window? From the windows you could see the courtyard, and in the center of the courtyard, a single tree.

“That is . . .”

Rakushun reverently faced the altar and clasped his hands together. Then he took Youko by the hand. To the left and right of the walls against which the altar was situated were two wide corridors that lead deeper into the interior. From the corridor she could see the courtyard grounds covered with white pebbles. And what she saw in the midst of the courtyard took her breath away.

It was a white tree. Wandering through the mountains, Youko had often sought the shelter of these strange trees. This tree was bigger than those, no different in height but was nearly twenty meters in diameter. At its highest point it stood six or seven feet tall. At its lowest its limbs brushed the ground. The white branches bore neither flowers nor leaves. Here and there a ribbon was tied to a branch and there fruits were ripening. The trees in the mountains bore rather small fruit in comparison. These were big enough to wrap her arms around.

“Rakushun, that is a . . .”

“A *riboku*.”

“A *riboku*? Where the ranka grow?”

“That’s right. Inside each of those yellow fruits is a child .”

“Wow . . .”

Youko gazed at the tree in amazement. She’d never seen anything like it back in Japan.

“You see, when you were like that, there was a shoku and you were carried off to Japan.”

“I find it all hard to believe.”

The branches and the fruit had the luster of polished steel.

“A couple who wish to have a child come to the shrine. They make offerings and pray that a child will be entrusted to them. Then they tie a ribbon to a branch. If the Tentei grants the petition, a fruit grows on the branch where the ribbon is tied. The fruit ripens in ten months^[21]. When the parents come to pluck the fruit, it falls. After resting for a night, the husk of the fruits breaks and the child is born.”

“So a fruit just can’t grow on its own. The parents have to petition first for it to happen.”

“That’s right. There are parents who are never rewarded, no matter how many times they ask. And parents who receive the gift almost at once. Heaven must determine whether or not they have the qualifications to raise a child.”

“It was the same with me? I had parents who tied a ribbon to a branch of the tree?”

“You did. And losing the ranka was certainly a profound disappointment to them.”

“Would there be any way to find them again?”

“I don’t know. A search of the records might reveal the answer. If you calculated the time at which you were swept away, and then figured out the time and place where such a shoku had occurred, and then investigated all the ranka that were swept away at the same time . . . It’d be tough.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

She was struck with the desire to search out the people who had wanted her, see what kind of people they were. Knowing that there were people here as well who had prayed for her birth finally convinced Youko of her origins. Under normal conditions, she should have been born in a place like this, somewhere in this world, in the embrace of the Sea of Emptiness.

“Children look like their parents, don’t they?”

“Why would children look like their parents?”

Rakushun treated it like such an odd question that Youko had to grin. A human woman with a child who looked like a rat. There couldn’t be anything in the way of genetic inheritance going on there.

“In that other world, children resemble their parents.”

“Well, *that’s* different. Isn’t it a bit creepy, though?”

“Hard to say whether it is or not.”

“Seems to me it’d be kinda creepy if everybody in the same household looked

like each other.”

“Come to think about it, you might have a point.”

A young couple entered into the courtyard. They consulted together, whispering while pointing at a branch. After a moment of indecision, they tied a thin, beautiful ribbon to the chosen limb.

“That ribbon is a design of their own making. While thinking about the child they wish born to them, they choose a lucky design and embroider it into the ribbon.”

“Oh.” It struck her as a most heartwarming custom. “When I was in the mountains I saw trees like this.”

Rakushun glanced up at Youko. “*Yaboku*.”

“They’re called yaboku? There was fruit growing on them, too.”

“There are two types of yaboku. Yaboku from which plants and trees are born and yaboku from which animals are born.”

Youko’s eye widened in surprise. She said to Rakushun, “Even plants and trees and animals are born from these trees?”

Rakushun nodded. “But, of course. How else would anything be born?”

“Well, ah . . .” If children could be born from trees, it stood to reason that so could animals and plant life.

“Domesticated livestock come from the riboku. Farmers petition the riboku for livestock on special days, following certain rules. In the wild, trees and plants and the beasts of the mountains reproduce on their own from the yaboku. Their fruits ripen on their own. In the case of trees and plants, the yaboku produces seeds. In the case of birds, the yaboku produces chicks. In the case of other animals, their young.”

“Isn’t it a bit risky for seeds and chicks and cubs to be born willy-nilly? You’d think a chick would soon become some other creature’s dinner.”

“The parents of animals also come to collect their offspring. Otherwise, until they can survive on their own. They live beneath the tree. That’s why other creatures can’t come close to the tree. Beasts who are natural enemies aren’t

born at the same time, and no matter how ferocious the animals might become, while beneath the tree they never fight. People who fail to get to a city before nightfall will go into the mountains and search out a yaboku. It's always safe beneath a yaboku."

"That makes sense."

"In exchange, no matter how fearsome a beast a cub might be grow up to be, it is absolutely forbidden to capture or kill one in sight of a yaboku."

"That being the case, I take it birds don't hatch from eggs."

Rakushun grimaced. "Who'd want to eat one with a chick inside?"

Youko laughed. "Yeah. I guess you wouldn't."

"Whenever I talk with you about such things, I get a weird feeling about that other world."

"I can see how. How about youma? I take it youma are also born from trees?"

"They are, naturally. Nobody has seen the tree from which youma are born, though. It's said that somewhere there are rookeries for youma. It would certainly be in such a place."

"Huh."

Youko nodded. She had more whimsical questions on the tip of her tongue, but they were of a more vulgar nature, so she thought better of asking them here. Like, exactly what kind of hanky-panky went on in the red-light districts, that kind of thing.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. Thanks for bringing me here. It's been very rewarding."

Rakushun smiled broadly in return. "It looks like they're done."

The young couple in the courtyard again turned to face the tree, their hands entwined together.

Chapter 54

[7-3] Rakushun insisted that they take a room at a *proper* inn and Youko had insisted that it was a waste of money.

“How could the Imperial Kei even think of staying in a cheap place like this?”

“The only person saying I’m the Imperial Kei is *you*. Because you’re my friend, I’m taking what you’re telling me at face value for the time being. But nothing’s been carved in stone.”

“And if it were?”

“In any case, it doesn’t make any difference.”

“You know, Youko . . . ”

“Look, with the traveling money I’ve got, this kind of inn is within my means. We don’t know how long it’s going to take to get a reply from the government. If we move into some high-class place and the days drag on, we’ll be out of money before we know it.”

“You’re the Imperial Kei. You shouldn’t even *have* to pay. To start with, what innkeeper would ever take money from an empress?”

“Then better that we stay here. It wouldn’t be fair to take a room and then try to skip out on the bill. I’m definitely not going to start freeloading off people.”

They ended up getting a room that could be said to be the best of the worst. It was a small, four tatami-mat room, about eight by ten feet. The room slept two. It had a window facing the courtyard. There was a small table beneath the window. It was the best they could hope for on their budgets.

Dusk was falling when they returned from the shrine. First off, Youko used the bath in the room, changed, and then washed her traveling clothes. With hot running water and a fresh change of clothes, she really was in hog heaven.

She went down to the dining hall where Rakushun was waiting and they ate dinner. Not a meal where they stood and ate off a cart, this was a proper dining room. Eating there was a real luxury. She slowly drank her tea, and was about to

announce she was ready to go back to the room.

A scream came from outside the inn.

No normal scream. Youko at once reached for the sword. She hadn't shed her habit of never being apart from the sword for even an instant. She grasped the hilt and sprang toward the door. The street was in an uproar. On the street corner across the way, people were running around in a great panic.

"Youko."

"I don't believe it. They're here."

She'd believed the youma wouldn't chase her all the way to En. And now that she thought about it, there was no reason for her to think so.

In the first place, there weren't many youma in En. Every night they got a room in an inn. They traveled only during the day, so it was natural that they wouldn't run into any youma. But she shouldn't have expected that her enemies would pursue her only in the mountains or only at night. Perhaps it was only good luck that had spared them so far.

"Rakushun, get back inside the inn."

"But, Youko . . ."

The screams of the fleeing people sounded familiar in her ears. The most piercing of the cries was the sound of a person in mortal danger. Mingled together with the screams was that sound like a wailing baby. The cries of the youma. Youko knew it well.

She drew the sword, pressed the sheath into Rakushun's hands. "Rakushun, get out of here. I'm begging you."

He did not reply. She felt only his presence slip away from her side.

The flood of people surged closer. Youko spied in their midst a black shadow like a small mountain. It resembled a huge tiger. "*Bafuku!*" she heard somebody shout.

Youko lowered the point of the sword and positioned herself lightly on the balls of her feet. The steel blade glittered in the light from the adjacent shops. The tide of onrushing people parted to the right and left of her.

The tiger rushed on, mowing down the people in front of it. Behind the tiger was a huge creature that looked like a big bull.

“Two of them . . .”

She steadied herself. She felt that long familiar sensation with something more than fear. *Exhilaration*. The melee of people poured out the alleyways and piled into the shops around her. She spotted a gap between her two foes. She sprinted toward them, building up momentum, brought the sword to the ready.

First, the tiger. The huge beast bounded toward her as if to pounce. She ducked at the last second and drove the tip of the sword into its enormous head. She pulled out the sword, planted her feet, plunged it in again, and then spun around to face the charging blue bull.

Their bodies were so big, cutting them down to size was going to take some effort. But there were only two of them so it wouldn't be too hard. She was giving herself some room to work with, sizing up the two of them, when Rakushun's voice echoed out.

“Youko! *Kingen!*”

Her eyes shot up. What looked like a flock of chickens was flying toward her. Ten, twenty, she couldn't tell how many.

“Don't let them sting you! They're poisonous!”

Youko clucked to herself in disgust. They were small, fast, and there were a lot of them. What a bloody pain in the neck. The birds' tails were shaped like ice picks. She struck down two and gave the tiger the coup de grace.

To keep from tripping and falling, she skipped past the corpses and with her back against the wall of the inn searched for better footing. She'd stuck the blue bull twice and it was in a frenzy. The cobblestones beneath her feet grew slick with the blood of the youma.

The cramped, poorly-lit alleyway, the birds gathering. No hope of assistance from the surrounding shops, save for the flickering lamplight. Beyond the muddy glow, the night was dark and deep. Before she knew it, the birds were on top of her. They fell on her, as boiling out of the blackness.

She dodged around the rearing head of the blue bull, took out another bird. She heard a multitude of cries drawing closer, sounding like the creaking of rusty hinges.

“More of them . . .”

Cold sweat ran down her back. While she had been distracted by the birds, the still-not-dead blue bull had become her most immediate threat. She saw a hoard of monkeys streaming out of the mouth of the alleyway.

Her attention faltered for a moment. A moment later, a bird’s razor-sharp scorpion tail was right in her face. She just managed to stumble out of the way and lost her balance. The next bird came at her, aiming straight at her eye. She knew she didn’t have time to duck.

So, just how bad was this poison? Forget about the poison, what about my eye? Even if I can’t see, I can fight. I’m not going to get my arm up in time.

The thoughts raced through her head in no more than a split second.

Damn. This one’s got me.

In the same instant that she closed her eyes, the bird diving toward her vanished. Someone had come in on her flank and clobbered the bird out of the sky. She didn’t have the time to tell who.

The birds came at her and she slashed them to pieces. She sidestepped the charging blue bull. As she did, that same someone pierced the back of its skull with a brilliantly executed stroke. It was with such skill that the dexterity of the stroke completely distracted her. He yanked out the sword and mowed down birds descending upon them.

He was a big man, a good head taller than herself. “Don’t let your guard down,” he said, and dispatched the last of the birds with ease.

Youko nodded, at the same time slashing at the charging monkeys as if swatting at flies. She impaled one leaping up behind them, and quickly found herself back in the midst of the battle.

The man’s skill far exceeded her own. His strength was an order of magnitude greater. The hoard was numerous, but the dead bodies piled up in the alleyway

and the tempest quieted down. It didn't take much time at all.

Chapter 55

[7-4] The man flicked the gore off his sword. He said, "You've got a pretty good arm."

He wasn't the least bit winded. He was a big man but not a giant. The picture of a gallant warrior. Youko looked up at him, still trying to catch her breath. He laughed. "This might not be the most appropriate thing to ask, but you are all right?"

She nodded, weakly raising an eyebrow.

"Don't have the strength left to talk?"

"Thank . . . you . . . very . . . much."

"It's nothing you need thank me for."

"Well, I certainly appreciate the help."

"Having youma wandering about is a nuisance. I didn't know I was coming to your rescue."

She was at a loss on how to reply. She felt somebody grab her tunic from behind. It was Rakushun. "Youko, are you okay?" Rakushun asked, stepping gingerly around the corpses beneath his feet.

She took the scabbard from him, wiped down the blade and sheathed the sword. "I'm okay. Are you injured?"

"I'm fine. Who's he?"

"Dunno," she said with a shrug.

The man only smiled. He indicated the building behind them. "Are you staying there?"

"Yeah."

Right, the man said to himself, glancing around the plaza. "People are coming. Do you drink?"

"No."

“How about you?” he asked Rakushun.

A bit befuddled, Rakushun quivered his whiskers and then nodded.

“Well, then. Let’s get ourselves some refreshment. Explaining everything to the constables will be quite the bother, otherwise.”

With this, he turned and strode off. Rakushun and Youko looked at each other. Spontaneously, they both agreed and ran after him.

The man pushed his way through the gathering crowds and set off down the street. It didn’t look like he had a particular destination in mind, glancing here and there as he walked along the busy thoroughfare. Finally, he decided on an inn. It was a big, gorgeous place. Tagging behind, Youko and Rakushun followed after him inside without a second glance.

Youko glanced back at Rakushun. “What do we do now?”

“What do you mean, what do we do? We’ve come this far . . .”

“That’s not what I mean. There’s a few things I want to talk over with this guy. Maybe you should go back to the inn, just to play it safe.”

“I’m not worried. Let’s go.”

Rakushun clambered up the stone steps and opened the door. Youko hurried to catch up. Inside the inn, the man and a waiter were waiting at the foot of the stairs. When he saw Youko, he smiled and climbed the stairs.

The waiter showed the man to a room on the third floor. It was a two-room suite with a balcony facing the courtyard. The room was big, the interior decor exquisite. Even the furniture was sumptuous. Youko couldn’t hide her trepidation. This inn was a higher class establishment than she had ever set foot in before.

The man ordered food and drink and sat down in a sofa-like armchair. He had the air of a person used to these surroundings. In the light of the countless candles, the fine cut of the man’s clothing was obvious as well.

“Um . . .”

The man smiled at Youko, who was standing stock still in the doorway. “Why don’t you sit down?”

“Pardon me.”

Youko and Rakushun exchanged looks. They both sat down. But she found it hard to settle down. The man only smiled to himself at their apparent discomfort and said nothing else. Not knowing how to respond, Youko glanced around the room. The waiter returned with the victuals.

“Does the gentleman require anything else?”

The man waved his hand and the waiter left, closing the door behind him. “Would you like a taste?”

Youko shook her head, as did Rakushun.

“Um . . . ” Youko didn’t have the foggiest idea of how to begin the conversation. Sensing this, the man spoke first. “That certainly is a splendid sword you have there.” His attention focused on Youko’s right hand, he reached out his hand.

She hesitated for any number of reasons but handed over the sword. He lightly gripped the hilt and drew the sword from the sheath. It came free without difficulty. Ignoring Youko’s exclamation of surprise, he examined the scabbard and blade.

“The scabbard is dead.”

“The scabbard is dead?”

“Have you seen strange visions in it?”

Youko raised her eyebrows. “Have I seen what?”

The man smiled at her skittish reaction. He sheathed the blade and reverently handed the sword back to her. Youko wrapped her hand around the hilt.

“So, what is it?” she asked, meaning her question to be taken literally. “I mean, what kind of thing is it?”

The man nonchalantly picked up a pitcher and poured himself a glass of something. The action betrayed not the slightest bit of defensiveness or agitation.

“That is the *Suiguu-tou*, the Water Monkey sword. The blade was smelted

from water, the scabbard formed from a monkey. Hence, the Water Monkey sword. The champion who wields it possesses far more than a sword. When you see the glowing light and hear the sound of falling water, the sword shows you visions. If done properly, it will show you the past and the future, and what is far away from you. If you are inattentive to it, it will chatter on incessantly. The scabbard is there to bind its spirit.”

Looking at Youko, he drained the glass. “The scabbard can change and turn into a monkey. The monkey can see into the hearts of people, and if care is not taken, it will confuse and bewilder the mind of its owner. Hence it is said that the sword seals the scabbard. It is the Imperial Regalia of the Kingdom of Kei.”

Without thinking, Youko jumped to her feet.

“However, this scabbard is dead. Without the seal of the scabbard, the visions would certainly run wild.”

“Who are you?”

“You sent a letter via the local ward office. So, tell me, what’s this about?”

“You’ve got to be kidding. *You’re* the Taiho of En?”

The man scowled. “The Taiho is unavailable at the moment. But I’ll listen to whatever you have to say.”

Youko felt a profound disappointment. So he wasn’t the Taiho after all. “I wrote it down in the letter.”

“So you did. Something about the Imperial Kei.”

“I am a kaikyaku. I don’t know much about this world. That’s what it comes down to.” Youko looked at Rakushun. “This is Rakushun. He says I’m the Imperial Kei.”

“Well,” the man readily agreed, “he would be right.”

“You believe him?”

“Believing has nothing to do with it. The Suiguu sword is the Imperial Regalia of Kei. Long ago, instead of destroying the most powerful and magical of the youma, they were subjugated and turned into this sword and scabbard, which became the crown jewels. Consequently, only their rightful owner can use them.

Namely, the Imperial Kei. That's because the one who first sealed them in the sword and scabbard was the emperor of Kei."

"But . . ."

"As the both of them were sealed together, only the true emperor could draw the sword. But because the scabbard is now dead, I can draw the sword. But even in my hands, the blade would not cut through one blade of grass. Nor would I see any of its visions."

Youko looked straight at him. "Who the hell are you?"

He wasn't any kind of normal guy, knowing what he knew about the Kingdom of Kei.

"Why don't you tell me your name first?"

"Youko Nakajima."

The man's gaze fell on Rakushun. "And the one named Chou Sei who sent the letter, that was you?"

"Yes," said Rakushun, quickly correcting his posture and coming to attention. Chou Sei was his formal given name.

"And your azana^[22]?"

"Rakushun."

"Yeah, and you are?" Youko glared at him.

The man wasn't intimidated. He gazed back at Youko without the slightest bit of defensiveness. "Naotaka Komatsu."

Youko gave him a long, hard look. "A kaikyaku?"

"A taika. The Chinese reading for my name is Shouryuu, which is more common. Though I'm afraid not common enough to be of much use to you."

"And . . . ?"

"And what?"

"Who exactly are you? Are you the Taiho's bodyguard, or something?"

"Ah," the man chuckled. "If my title is what you're after, then I am known as

the Imperial En. The emperor of the Kingdom of En.”

Chapter 56

[7-5] Youko stood frozen on the spot. Rakushun's tail and whiskers shot straight up. Youko stared at the man. He laughed. He was clearly enjoying himself.

"The Imperial En . . . ?"

"I am. I'm sorry the Taiho couldn't meet with you, but I thought I'd make myself useful. Will only the Taiho do?"

"No, no, that's okay," said Youko, too taken aback to think of what else to say.

He smiled and dipped his finger in the wine glass. "Well, let's start from the beginning. One year ago, the Empress of Kei passed away. Posthumously, she is now known as the Late Empress Yo. Were you aware of this?"

"No."

The Imperial En nodded. "Her given name was Jokaku. She had a younger sister named Joei. You could say that Joei usurped the throne."

"Usurped?"

"The emperor has a kirin. The kirin chooses the emperor. You know this?"

"Yes."

"The Late Empress Yo left her kirin behind, Keiki. What do you know of him?"

"We've met. He's the one who brought me here."

The Imperial En nodded again. "When the Late Empress Yo died, the throne was vacated. Keiki immediately began the search for a new emperor. Yet the announcement of the accession of the new emperor of Kei came only two months after the death of the Late Empress. I couldn't help thinking this was in fact a *giou*."

"A *giou*."

The Imperial En took his finger from the wine glass and painted the characters on the tabletop. "A pretender to the throne. The kirin chooses the emperor. An

emperor who ascends the throne without the blessing of the kirin is a pretender. Felicitous omens should attend the accession of a new emperor. None accompanied Joei. Quite to the contrary, youma are on the rampage and locusts are swarming. Everything tells me this emperor is nothing of the sort.”

“I don’t . . .”

. . . *get it*, she was going to say, but the Imperial En held up his hand and stopped her.

“There was no doubt in my mind that we were dealing with a pretender. When I investigated further, I discovered it was in fact the sister of the Late Empress Yo who had claimed the throne. The sister of the Empress is an ordinary woman. She cannot enter the Imperial Palace, and consequently, cannot govern the country. I knew this was a serious matter.”

Youko didn’t follow well what he was telling her, but she opened her ears and listened.

“Regardless, she set herself up within the fortress of one of the province lords and from there proclaimed her enthronement. The ordinary citizens had no way of judging the truth for themselves. They had no reason to question her authenticity, rather, they were ready to believe. She declared that the province lords had conspired together to prevent her—the rightful Empress—from entering the Imperial Palace. The people believed her and blamed them. Joei even dared to declare war on what she deemed her *treasonous and disloyal subjects*, and solicited new officials and soldiers. She was met with a flood of enlistees.”

The Imperial En continued with a sullen expression. “The enthronement of the previous empress took a long time and her reign was short. The kingdom had not yet been able to recover and the resentment of the peasants against the province lords was deep. Of the nine provinces, already two are ruled by pretenders, and three more have been toppled by their armies.”

“Has no one been able to refute her claims?”

“Some have tried. When the province lords pointed out the absence of the kirin, Joei insisted that *they* were hiding him. But then he was produced by Joei, making their position untenable. She claimed Keiki had been rescued from her

enemies who had kidnapped him. The presentation of the kirin in its creature form made it hard for anyone to question her or rescue Keiki. And with that, of the four remaining provinces, two more switched sides.”

“They produced Keiki. Then Keiki . . .”

“Apparently he was captured.”

That’s why he hadn’t come to rescue her. It wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened but it was damned near close.

Rakushun said, “So this Joei has been sending assassins after Youko.”

“It’s not possible. You’re talking about youma attacking people. That does happen. Singling out, pursuing, and attacking a specific person, that does not. Were they *shirei*, though, then it becomes another matter, entirely.”

“Shirei?”

“The emperor employs the special powers of the Imperial Regalia, and the kirin commands the shirei. If someone were commanding the youma to attack a specific person, it could only be a kirin.”

So the youma that surrounded Keiki were under his command. That’s what Youko took from the explanation. But Rakushun’s reaction was one of extreme agitation.

“It can’t be!”

The Imperial En nodded, a grave look upon his countenance. “No, it should not be. But I can think of no other explanation. It was by means of the kirin’s shirei that the wild youma were sent to attack the Imperial Kei.”

“It’s just . . .”

“When I think this through logically, I conclude that Joei has neither the resolve nor the resources to raise and maintain an army. There must be someone behind the scenes pulling the strings. If that someone is also sending forth the shirei, turn that rock over and you should find an emperor there.”

Youko looked back and forth between Rakushun and the En. “Meaning?”

The Imperial En asked, “Do you know what kind of a being a kirin is?”

“The sacred beast that chooses the emperor . . . ”

“Yes, it is. But a kirin is no *you*-creature like the youma. Closer to a god. It has the heart of a beast, but can take upon a human appearance. Its whole being is suffused with charity and compassion. It is aloof and detached, but it cannot abide conflict. In particular, it has a horror of blood. The stain of blood makes it ill. It will never take up the sword and fight. It has the shirei to protect itself. The shirei are youma, though youma that have covenanted with the kirin and become what you might call its servants. In no wise would they ever take it upon themselves to attack a human being. To do so would be contrary to the kirin’s will.”

“And yet?”

And yet, the emperor is the kirin’s lord. Though the kirin bears no malice toward any person, if the emperor commands it, that changes everything. The shirei attacked you because the emperor ordered the kirin to do so. Nothing else is possible.”

“Could this Joei have *tamed* a kirin?”

“No. There is only one kirin in a kingdom and the emperor is its lord. No one else.”

So that meant an emperor had put a price on her head. Then she remembered, the woman on the mountain road. She had watched her mourn the death of the youma. Was it because those youma had been her shirei? The parrot had commanded her to kill Youko. Weeping, unable to defy him, she had brandished the sword. If that parrot was the emperor’s mouthpiece and that woman was a kirin . . . the pieces of the puzzle began to fall together.

“But whose kirin?” *And what king of what kingdom?*

The Imperial En stared off into the distance. “The answer will become apparent soon.”

“But . . . ”

“As long as you are within our custody, no one will lay a finger upon you. The problem for your enemies is that Keiki is a kirin, and not so easily disposed of. Were the kirin murdered, the emperor who ordered your assassination would be

quickly revealed. Heaven could not overlook such an injustice.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Better to leave it alone for now. That kingdom will decline. Who is giving the orders will become clear. However,” the Imperial En said with a broad smile, “that Keiki is being held prisoner in Kei alone justifies a rescue mission. In order to do so, and in order to protect you, we must get Her Highness to a safer place. Shall we be going?”

“Right now?”

“As soon as possible. If you have belongings at the inn, there’s just enough time to go fetch them. I’d like to take you to my place.”

Youko look at Rakushun. Rakushun nodded. “You’d better get going, Youko. That is the safest way.”

“But . . .”

“Don’t worry about me. Go.”

The Imperial En smiled at Rakushun’s admonition. “Another guest is hardly going to complicate things any further. It’s kind of a dilapidated old place but I’ve got rooms to spare.”

“You—you can’t be serious!”

“Keep in mind that I’m an utter incompetent when it comes to housekeeping. But if you don’t mind, then you’re welcome. I think the Imperial Kei would be more at ease with you there as well.”

His home was none other than Gen’ei Palace. Privately shocked that he would refer to it like some broken-down hut, Youko said to Rakushun, “C’mon, let’s go. I wouldn’t feel good about leaving you behind.”

Rakushun nodded stiffly.

Chapter 57

[7-6] **W**hen the Imperial En arrived at the outskirts of the city, he put his fingers to his mouth and sounded a high whistle.

Walking all the way to Kankyuu would take another month. Moreover, at night, there was no getting in or out of the city. Youko was trying to figure out how in the world he was planning to get to Kankyuu when, in response to the whistle, a shadow appeared above the wall. She could make out the glowing forms of two tigers. The play of light on their coats turned their black stripes an iridescent white, not as pale as pearl, not as impenetrable as a slick of oil. Their impressive eyes were like black opals, their tails magnificently long.

As on that very first night when she'd crossed the Kyokai, Youko climbed onto the tiger. They flew into the night sky, a half moon rising, and turned toward Kankyuu.

She felt a deep nostalgia. Looking back at it now, how much time had passed since then? She had ridden on one of Keiki's shirei, by the name of Hyouki. When they'd headed out over the ocean, it was still cold. The Youko then didn't understand a thing, not about Keiki, not about herself.

Now it was summer. The heat rested like a blanket on the night, the air around them so still as to seem melancholy.

Just as on the night she'd crossed the Kyokai, the nightscape opened up below them as the beast galloped through the sky. The nights in En were bright, the villages and hamlets twinkling like small constellations of stars. It reminded her of the Kyokai.

"Youko, there is Kankyuu."

Seated behind her, clinging to her back, Rakushun pointed with his small forefoot off into the distance ahead of them. At that point, two hours had passed since the journey began. She saw nothing in the direction Rakushun had indicated. There wasn't a city there, only the deep blackness. *Where?* she was going to ask, when she understood what it was she was looking at. Rakushun

wasn't pointing out something *within* the darkness, he was pointing at the darkness itself.

"I don't believe it . . ."

Bathed in the light of the half moon, the world below was the dark color of the ocean. The contours of the forests had a faint white glow, like waves, dotted with a countless number of lights.

Within the nightscape was a deep, black hole.

No, not a hole. It was a silhouette, the moon rising up behind it. What had gouged a hole in the nightscape below looked like a hole, but was in fact the rising shape of a . . .

" . . . a mountain."

Could such a mountain exist?

They were so high already that the villages appeared as no more than dots. Even so, she found herself looking up and up.

A mountain that reaches to heaven, Rakushun had said.

How could a mountain reach to heaven? For a moment, Youko had the feeling of being a very small, insignificant speck of life.

A soaring mountain like the pillars penetrating heaven and earth. The shape of the mountain, rising abruptly from the hilly countryside and projecting upwards toward the sky, looked like a bundle of calligraphy brushes^[23] of different lengths stood on end. The narrow, steep summit of the mountain was shrouded with clouds that hid it from view.

The sheer rock face creating such a silhouette was more like an enormous wall.

"That's Kankyuu? That mountain?"

Comparing the tiger's legs against the mountain, they were still an unbelievably long way off. That's how big this mountain was.

"That is Kankyuu Mountain. Such a mountain is home to the imperial palaces in all the kingdoms. The palace is at the very summit."

The light of the moon gleamed faintly on the outlines of the rising cliffs, so

pointed as to come close to the vertical. She searched for the familiar shape of a palace, but with the summit hidden in the clouds, she could be sure of nothing. At the base of the mountain she saw one or two points of light.

“Those lights are the city of Kankyuu.”

If it was the capital, it must be bigger than Ugou. They must be so far away that the lights were all she could see of the city.

Youko was momentarily overcome with surprise. Even at the rate the beast was flying, Kankyuu was not close enough to seem to be moving. Slowly, the mountain drew nearer, such that she could not take the entire mountain into view without turning her head, nor could she clearly see its summit. At last, she could see the outlines of the city of Kankyuu.

The city rose up around the base of this absurdly high mountain, spreading out in an arc over the gently rolling terrain. Lying in the shadow of a mountain so gigantic, the nights must be very long indeed.

When she asked Rakushun, he confirmed that it was so. “I went once to the capital of Kou, Gousou, and that’s what it was like. Because Gousou is to the east of the mountain, the twilight lasts a long time.”

“Huh.”

Seen from above, Kankyuu was a large city. A sea of light spread out beneath them. And before them, as far as the eye could see, the cliffs. The bare, treeless layers of stone that made up the narrow, vertical mountain looked chalky in the dark.

Up ahead, the Imperial En had alighted on a rocky ledge projecting from the side of the cliff

The landing area was about the size of a tennis court. The level area had apparently been hewn from a larger mass of rock. Following the Imperial En, the tiger Youko and Rakushun were riding set down on the ledge.

Grinning, the Imperial En glanced back over his shoulder at them. “Looks like you made it here without falling off.”

How could you fall off? Youko wondered. On the back of the tiger, there was

no sense of cutting through the wind, no shaking from side to side.

As if reading her thoughts, he smiled. “The height makes some people dizzy. Others get so used to the sensation they fall asleep.”

Sure, Youko thought sarcastically.

Intricate designs were carved deeply into the smooth landing area, like anti-skid marks. There were no handrails and she had no urge to peer over the edge. She couldn’t begin to imagine how far above the ground they already were.

A pair of doors led from the ledge into the cliff. The Imperial En turned on his heels and headed toward the doors. The doors both swung inwards before he arrived.

The doors were twice her height and seemed to have been fashioned from a single slab of stone. As heavy as the door looked, they were opened by a pair of soldiers. She wasn’t positive that they were soldiers. But as they both wore thick leather breastplates, it seemed a logical conclusion.

After nodding to the soldiers, the Imperial En looked back at Youko and Rakushun, beckoning them to follow along. When they passed through the doors, the two soldiers bowed, but not deeply, and then hurried out onto the ledge where the two tigers were resting. They were probably going to water and feed and groom them as they would a pair of horses.

“What’s holding you up? This way.” The Imperial En was looking at her. She hurried to catch up and found herself within a large hallway.

The chandelier overhead made the room as bright as day. Fluttering his whiskers in amazement, Rakushun stared up at the ceiling. So it must be something pretty unusual.

The hall wasn’t long, leading to a much less impressive room. From there, in the middle of a tunnel-like arch, a white stone staircase continued on upwards. Seeing the staircase, Rakushun’s whiskers drooped.

The Imperial En glanced back and said encouragingly, “Come on. No need to worry about courtesies.”

“Not at all.” Rakushun had a stiff expression on his face that Youko understood

at once. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “You know, Youko, I think this is how we get up there.”

“Yeah, probably.” The thought left her in a less than enthusiastic mood as well. The ledge they had landed on was quite high up, but the distance that remained from here to the summit was comparable to a skyscraper. Walking up all that way would be torture.

Nevertheless, Youko kept her thoughts to herself and stepped onto the staircase. She took hold of Rakushun’s hand. The rise of each step was short, but the staircase itself was long. They climbed the stairs in step with the Imperial En. Where the stairs ended there was a large landing. They turned ninety degrees and climbed another flight of stairs and entered a small room. At the back of the room was a door. The thick, wooden door was beautifully adorned with vivid *bas-relief* carvings.

Passing through that door, a soft breeze drifted in, carrying with it the rich scent of the sea.

“Oh . . . ” Youko unconsciously exclaimed. Before them was a wide terrace. They were already above the clouds.

What miracle this was, she didn’t know, but ascending those few steps had brought them already to the very heights of the mountain. The floor was finished in white stone, as were the balustrades of the terrace. Beneath the terrace, waves of white clouds broke against the shore.

They were the whitecaps of actual waves, Youko realized in astonishment. “Rakushun!” she shouted, “it’s an ocean!”

She ran to the railing. Beneath her feet, where the terrace protruded from the face of the cliff, the tall waves crested and broke. As she cast her eyes about, she knew this was the surface of an ocean and where the smell of the sea came from.

“There is an ocean above the sky,” said Rakushun.

Youko glanced back at him. “An ocean above the sky?”

“Well, if there wasn’t an ocean, then we wouldn’t call it a Sea of Clouds.”

The rich smell of the ocean mingled together with the wafting breezes. The black sea reached out as far as she could see. Waves crashed against the shore beneath the terrace. Leaning out over the railing and peering down into the water, she could see lights in the depths of the sea. It was like the Kyokai, but then she realized that these were the distant lights of Kankyuu.

“This is so cool. But why doesn’t the water all just fall down?”

“Well,” said the Imperial En, with a chuckle, “if the Sea of Clouds were to fall like rain, that would cause quite a bit of trouble for everyone. If it would please Her Highness, I’m sure we could arrange a room with a balcony for the Imperial Kei.”

“You know,” said Youko, trying to put this as politely as possible, “I would really appreciate it you could stop it with this *Her Highness* stuff.

Amused, the Imperial En raised an eyebrow. “And why is that?”

“I guess it seems like you’re talking about somebody else.”

The Imperial En laughed. He was about to say something, then suddenly looked up at the sky. Following the direction of his gaze, Youko saw a slender beam of light.

“It looks like the Taiho has returned. Well, then, Youko.”

He turned around. At the left-hand side of the veranda was a short stone staircase. Youko followed after him, stepping where he stepped. She looked up in amazement.

There, arranged upon an island-like formation in the center of the craggy mountain, its cliffs white in the light of the moon, were a countless number of buildings. The curiously-shaped rocks, the branches of trees and shrubs protruding from the bare rock, and the many narrow waterfalls were like a scene depicted in a sumi-e^[24] watercolor.

Some of the buildings on the cliffs were pagodas. Others had multiple stories. Corridors running in all direction connected them together, creating one massive structure. It was an enormous palace embedded within the mountain itself. The heart of the Kingdom of En. The residence of the Imperial En. Gen’ei Palace.

Chapter 58

[7-7] As soon as Youko and Rakushun entered the building, they were surrounded by a number of what they took to be servants. The servants separated them from the Imperial En and hustled them off to rooms further inside.

“Hey,” said Youko.

“Wait a minute,” said Rakushun.

A lady-in-waiting turned to the flustered Youko and Rakushun and said with an impassive expression on her face, “Please follow me. A change of clothes shall be made available. Your baths are being drawn.”

In other words, they should not be wandering around the palace in such an unkempt state. Despite their confusion, they agreed. They were brought buckets of water and scrubbed themselves down. After that, behind a set of folding screens, took turns soaking in the bath. When they went into the next room, they found new clothes laid out on a big table.

“We’re supposed to change into *this*?” Rakushun held up the florid fabric with a look of disgust. “Seems to be men’s clothing. Maybe he thinks you’re a man or knows you’re a woman and is having a little fun with you.”

“Looks like there’s a suit for you, too,” Youko pointed out.

Rakushun’s shoulder’s slumped. “Yes, it should have occurred to me before but I guess it would be considered rude to show up like this.”

In other words, *naked*, Youko thought, handing him his clothes. She recalled the hanjuu she’d seen on the streets. More than a few of them were wearing clothes. As put out as Rakushun looked, when she imagined him dressed up like that she had to smile.

His shoulders rounded, dragging his tail, she sent Rakushun off behind the folding screens while she changed her clothes. The trousers had an ample cut and were made of a soft, pale fabric, as was the blouse. A long, finely-embroidered tunic finished up the ensemble.

Everything was made out of silk. After becoming used to plain clothing scratching against her skin, it was ticklish. About the time she had finished tying the sash, the door opened and an old man appeared.

“Have you finished with your wardrobe?”

“I have. I think my friend . . . ”

. . . *needs some more time*, she started to say, when the screens moved. “It’s okay,” he answered in a low voice. “I’m done.”

Youko gaped at the figure that appeared from behind the screens. For a moment she was at a loss for words.

“What?”

“Rakushun, is that . . . you?”

“Sure is.” He nodded and grinned. “The first time you’ve seen me like this. But I’m still Rakushun.”

Youko put her hands up to her face in mortification. Now she understood what Rakushun meant when she hugged him and he said that she needed to learn some “discretion.”

“I forgot that some things here are still beyond the bounds of my common sense.”

“So it seems.” He laughed, a striking man of twenty or so, of average height and a tad thin. In any case, a healthy young man. A “legal adult” really did mean a *human* who had come of age.

“An ordinary animal couldn’t talk, right? I said I was a *hanjuu*, right?”

“Yeah . . . you’re right.”

She felt her face burning. A *hanjuu*, literally a *half*-beast, he had said. A legal adult, he had said. Not only had they hugged, but they’d shared rooms together, and a long time ago she vaguely recalled that he had changed her nightclothes.

“Youko, just when you seem to have it all together, you can still completely miss the big picture.”

“I think so, too. So why aren’t you always in human form, then?” Youko asked,

a peevish tone creeping unbidden into her voice.

Rakushun sighed despite himself. “Because it’s a lot easier being a rat,” he said, an air of resentment in his voice. His vermillion-clad shoulders sagged disconsolately. “I’m telling you, dressing up like this is a real pain in the neck. My shoulders are so stiff. And to makes things worse, on a highfalutin day like today.”

He complained so miserably that Youko had to giggle.

The old man accompanied them down a long hallway and into a large room. The scent of the sea drifted in through a pair of open French windows. The Imperial En glanced over his shoulder at them. He was standing on the terrace, facing the water. He’d changed as well but their outfits were that different. Youko and Rakushun were by no means wearing *haute couture*, so imperial dress must be unostentatious by design. In fact, the emperor’s clothes appeared rather plain considering his stature. There was nothing pompous or pretentious about him.

The Imperial En grinned as he came back into the room. “I see you’ve dressed. My attendants insist on sticking to formalities. It is annoying, but they get quite upset when you don’t do exactly as you’re told. I do apologize.”

Youko thought perhaps it was the Imperial En who was underdressed. His tone was charming enough that she limited her response to a smile.

“Rakushun, you want to take all that off, it’s okay with me.”

Rakushun (the young man) managed a strained smile. “It’s nothing to be concerned about. What about the Taiho?”

“He’ll be here any minute.” As he spoke, the door opened. The scent of salt air filled the room. “Speak of the devil.”

There was a pair of screens inside the doors. The personage who appeared from behind them was a golden-haired boy of twelve or thirteen.

“How are things going?”

“As expected, they don’t seem to have ascended yet to the Imperial Palace. Interesting guests you have.”

“They’re not my guests. They’re yours.”

“Mine? Never met them before.” The boy scowled and turned to Youko and Rakushun. “So, what’s with you two?”

“Now, now, you can be nicer than that.”

“You know what it means to mind your own business?”

“You’re going to regret it.”

“So, you finally decided to get yourself a better half, huh?”

“I’m not kidding.”

“Your mother, then?”

“And if she is neither my wife nor my mother, will you remember your manners then?” The Imperial En sighed and turned to the dumbfounded Youko. “I’m sorry, but this is Enki. An incorrigible little cuss.” To Enki he said, “Oh, Rokuta, let me introduce to you Her Imperial Highness, the Empress of Kei.”

Enki gulped audibly, took a very big step backwards and peered up at her. Youko tried but couldn’t help herself and burst out laughing. It was perhaps the first time she had truly laughed out loud since crossing the Kyokai.

“You should have said so in the first place! Son of a bitch!”

“Takes one to know one,” said the Imperial En. “Her companion is Sir Rakushun.” He grew more serious. “How are things in Kei?”

The boy sobered up as well. “It looks like Ki Province has fallen.”

Rakushun wrote out the character for “Ki.” Even though everything was automatically translated for her, Youko still had to attend to how things were written. The spoken language wasn’t a problem but that alone wasn’t enough to make her literate.

“Only the northern province of Baku remains. Joei resides in Sei Province, as she has all along. Her armies have grown such that the Imperial Army doesn’t dare cross swords with them.”

Rakushun wrote “Imperial Army” using the characters, *The Imperial Masters of War*.

“The pretender’s army is advancing on Baku Province. The province lord of Baku has three thousand soldiers under his command. He can’t hold out for long. It’s only a matter of time.” He sat himself down on top of the table and helped himself to some fruit. “So where’d you find the Imperial Kei, anyway?”

The Imperial En gave him the abridged version. Enki listened silently and then leaned forward and said with sullen expression, “What kind of fool would sent a kirin to attack a human?”

“For the time being, we can leave aside the question of who is pulling the strings. But we’ve got to get Keiki back.”

“The sooner the better. Once they realize the Imperial Kei is here, they may kill him.”

“Excuse me,” Youko interrupted. “But I don’t understand any of this.”

The Imperial En raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

“Look, I was brought here totally in the dark. The Imperial En says I’m the Empress of Kei, so I guess it must be true. Just as it’s true that some emperor somewhere obviously wants me dead. But I never wanted to be the Imperial Kei. I didn’t reach out to you hoping you’d recognize me as the Imperial Kei or anything. I don’t much care for getting chased around by youma and I didn’t particularly enjoy getting chased around by those soldiers in Kou either. The only reason I’m here is to ask the Imperial En for a way to get back to Japan. That’s it.”

The Imperial En and Enki looked at each other. For a while, everybody was silent. Then the Imperial En spoke up.

“Youko, have a seat.”

“I . . .”

“Sit down. There’s something I’d like you to hear and it’s going to take a few minutes.”

Chapter 59

[7-8] The Imperial En stared off into space for a moment. Then he said, “There are people and there are kingdoms. So it stands to reason that there must be people to govern those kingdoms, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes.”

“This palace is where the emperor resides. The emperor administers the affairs of state. As this responsibility falls upon his shoulders, he must administer the government in accordance with the wishes of the people. Of course, power corrupts and often the emperor ends up oppressing his subjects. I’m not saying that all rulers are by definition bad. But from the time the emperor takes up the reins of power, he is no longer an ordinary person. And what he knows of being an ordinary person slips away.”

“I’ve heard it said that the Imperial En is an enlightened monarch.”

The Imperial En smiled wryly. “I wouldn’t go that far. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. The point is, when emperors oppress their subjects, what recourse do the people have?”

“There’s always democracy,” Enki interjected. “The people choose an emperor of their own liking. And when he becomes not to their liking, they choose somebody else.”

“Well, that’s one way,” the Imperial En responded. “But here it is done another. If an emperor is oppressing his subjects, then someone chooses an emperor who won’t. That someone is the kirin.”

“The kirin chooses the emperor on behalf of the people?”

“That’s one way to put it. Here we have may be called the Divine Will. God created the earth and the kingdoms and established the natural law. According to the Divine Will, the kirin chooses the emperor and the emperor, in turn, receives the Mandate of Heaven.”

“Mandate of Heaven.”

“The emperor protects the kingdom, comes to the aid of the commoners, and maintains law and order. The kirin selects those capable of carrying out that Mandate. Those chosen are placed upon the throne. Ideally, Heaven will enthrone wise rulers by means of the kirin. Some may call me an enlightened monarch but that’s hardly true. All emperors possess the character and capability to reign with wisdom, strength and benevolence.”

Youko didn’t respond, only sat there quietly.

“Still, many enlightened monarchs have reigned in Japan and China. So why haven’t these countries, by and large, remained at peace?”

Youko nodded slightly. “Even if a person is a so-called enlightened monarch, he can go astray in a moment of weakness. And even if he doesn’t, the best ruler will die someday. The person who succeeds him will not necessarily be so wise. So it’s inevitable that you’ll eventually end up between some kind of rock and hard place.”

“That’s right. But if a monarch were made immortal, made a god, that would solve half the problem. And then supposing the emperor does die? Better to eliminate hereditary rule and required the kirin to choose a new emperor and watch him very carefully to make sure he doesn’t stray. Do you think that would work?”

“Yeah, I suppose that would work.”

As if in agreement, the Imperial En nodded once. “For the present time, the Kingdom of En has been entrusted to me. Enki chose me as emperor. The selection process has nothing to do with how hard a person wishes to be emperor or how hard he strives to be a ruler. The kirin relies on his intuition, the way a man decides upon a woman. Or perhaps I should say, the way a woman chooses a man. I was a taika. I wasn’t born here. Like you, I hadn’t the slightest idea of what an emperor was or should be. Yet the kirin chose me. And so an emperor I am. The Mandate of Heaven rests upon my shoulders and nothing I can do can change that.”

“Does that mean I can’t go home?”

“You may, if you wish. But you are still the Empress of the Eastern Kingdom of Kei. That calling you cannot repudiate.”

Youko's head slumped.

"The kirin covenants with the chosen emperor. Thereafter, the kirin will not divorce himself from the emperor. It is an unbreakable compact of obedience. After the emperor takes the throne, the kirin stands by him as his chief counselor."

"Enki, too? He's the chief counselor?"

Youko looked at the boy sitting cross-legged on the table. The Imperial En chuckled. "Looks can be deceiving. You might not be convinced by looking at him but kirin are, by nature, beings of justice and mercy."

Enki scowled. The emperor smiled. "You will find nothing in the counsel of the Taiho but words of justice and mercy. But justice and mercy alone cannot govern a kingdom. There are times when I have gone forth when Enki said to pull back, when I have acted ruthlessly and without mercy. At times, that is what the righteous rule of a kingdom requires. If I adhered to every word Enki spoke, the kingdom would fall to pieces."

"Yeah . . . I suppose."

"For example, imagine there is a criminal, a man who murders for money. And let us imagine that this man has a hungry wife and child. In such a case, Enki would tell me to spare the rod. But to leave criminals at large would make the kingdom unmanageable. Regrettable though it may be, the man must be convicted for his crimes."

"Sure . . . I guess."

"On the other hand, let us suppose that I ordered Enki to execute the criminal. A kirin has not the disposition to do such a thing, but in the end, protesting all the while, he would carry out the order. Enki must obey me. *Must*. A kirin cannot oppose the will of the emperor. Even if I ordered him to kill himself—if, in fact, such an order could be given—he would not disobey."

"So you're saying that after you're chosen by the kirin, you can pretty much do what you want?"

"Therein arises the hard part. It is the Divine Will of Heaven that an emperor rules righteously. Heaven desires that the kingdom be governed with justice and

mercy. Heaven's proxy in this regard is the kirin. However, as I said, a kingdom cannot be governed by justice and mercy alone. There are times when you must be unjust, when you must act without mercy. But only to a certain degree will Heaven turn a blind eye."

Youko simply looked at him.

"You may act ruthlessly for the good of the kingdom. But only to a point. Go past that point and the emperor loses the right to rule. After all, the throne was given him by Heaven. And when an emperor strays too far and loses the Mandate of Heaven, the kirin falls ill. This illness is called *shitsudou*, or the Loss of the Way."

The Imperial En wrote the characters in the air. "When the emperor strays from the Way, the kirin suffers. At that point, a wise emperor mends his ways. If he does not, the kirin won't recover. It is not enough for the kirin to simply persevere. The problem is one of character, the same as with all those people who promise to change their ways and do not. There are few cases of emperors who were able to remedy the situation after a kirin was struck down with the *shitsudou*."

"And what happens if he can't?"

"Then the kirin will die. And if the kirin dies so will the emperor."

"Dies . . ."

"Human life is short. The emperor doesn't age and won't die because his name is recorded in the Census of Heaven. Emperors are immortal because they are gods. But it is the kirin that makes the emperor a god. So if the kirin dies so does the emperor."

Youko nodded.

"Aside from the emperor returning to the Way, there is one other way for the kirin to be cured of the *shitsudou*."

"And that is?"

"The emperor releases the kirin from the covenant. The simplest method is for the emperor to end his own life. If the emperor dies first, the kirin will not."

“And so the kirin will be spared?”

“Indeed. Keiki being a case in point.” The Imperial En took a breath. “The Late Empress Yo was by nature human and human beings are by no means perfect. She became romantically attached to Keiki. She wouldn’t allow any women to associate with Keiki. She paraded herself around as his wife and grew insanely jealous. In the end, she went too far, expelled all women from the palace and tried to drive all women from the kingdom. With Keiki covering for her, she only grew more extreme, and tried to have those who remained killed. At that point, Keiki fell ill.”

“And . . . ?”

“The late Empress parted from the Way because of her romantic attachment to Keiki. The prospect of being the cause of his death could not be pleasing to her. In some small way, she had not fallen so far as to be beyond reason. So the Late Empress Yo climbed Mount Hou and there renounced the throne. Heaven accepted her abdication and Keiki was emancipated from her.”

“What happened to her?”

“Becoming an emperor or empress means dying as a human and being reborn as a god. When you are no longer a monarch, you cannot continue to live.”

And so Empress Jokaku of the Kingdom of Kei passed away.

“You have already been chosen by Keiki as the next emperor. To accede to the throne, you must ascend Mount Hou and accept the Divine Decrees. However, no significant distinction should be made between the covenant and accession to the throne. The Mandate of Heaven has descended. You are the Empress of Kei. Nothing you can do will change it. Do you understand?”

Youko nodded.

“The emperor has the responsibility to govern the kingdom. You may, if you wish, cast your kingdom aside and return to Japan. A kingdom abandoned by its monarch will fall into chaos. When that happens, make no mistake, Heaven will cast you aside as well.”

“And Keiki will be struck down with the shitsudou and die.”

“Most likely, yes. But it doesn’t end there. Think about the your subjects as well. An emperor doesn’t only rule. He also reigns in the natural forces and the youma. Without him, youma run rampant. Tempests storm. Droughts and floods and epidemics ravage the land. The hearts of men grow confused. When the realm falls to ruin, there are no words on the lips of the people but those of suffering.”

“Falls to ruin?”

“Yes. It took Keiki a long time to find the Late Empress Yo. The throne was vacant for an extended period. In that time, the kingdom was left in turmoil and the people were impoverished. An empress was finally placed upon the throne but her reign lasted only six years. In recent years, as he suffered from the shitsudou, public order disintegrated. Then this calamity. All those in walking distance of En or Kou fled the country. The great majority remain behind in Kei. During this time, they have been left to the mercies of the youma and natural disasters. There is no other way of saving them.”

“You mean, placing a righteous emperor on the throne as soon as possible?”

“Precisely.”

Youko shook her head. “There’s just no way.”

“Why is that? I believe that you possess all the necessary imperial attributes.”

“You’re kidding.”

“You are the master of your own soul. You know what responsibilities you bear toward yourself alone. When it comes to a ruler who lacks such knowledge, trying to persuade him of his duties is useless. How can he who cannot rule himself rule others?”

“I . . . can’t.”

“But . . .”

“Shouryuu,” Enki said in a reproofing voice. “You’re twisting arms. What the Imperial Kei does with the Kingdom of Kei is up to her. Until she is prepared to accept the consequences of her actions, let her be.”

The Imperial En sighed. “Yes, you are right. But this alone I wish to ask of the

Imperial Kei. I am doing everything I can think of to assist the people of Kei. But the national treasury is not inexhaustible. I am pleading with you to save your kingdom.”

“I’ll think it over.” Youko hung her head. There was no way she could bring herself to look them in the eye.

“Excuse me,” said Rakushun, “but has anybody figured out what emperor is trying to kill Youko?”

The Imperial En looked at Enki. Enki stared off into the distance. He said, “Who do you think it is?”

“Well, I’ve concluded it’s probably the Imperial Kou.”

Youko looked at Rakushun. For just a moment, this young man with the strained expression on his face seemed in no way connected to the gentle rat she knew.

“And why’s that?”

“This is only conjecture. But Youko was chased to exhaustion in those mountains. I don’t think all of the youma that attacked her were the kirin’s shirei. In that case, what could have caused wild youma living in the mountains to come together like that? Even if half were shirei, that’s still too many. I can’t help feeling that the Kingdom of Kou itself is on the decline.”

The Imperial En nodded. “So it is. In fact, I received from Kou a strongly-worded petition seeking the extradition of a kaikyaku who fled to En. Kaikyaku have fled here from Kou before. But extraditing a kaikyaku is such an unusual step that I had Enki look into it. Somehow or other, someone in Kou has been supplying Joei with funds. Furthermore, Kou *is* falling into chaos. Not only does this cast all the more suspicion upon the Imperial Kou, but only yesterday, we received word that Kourin had fallen ill with the shitsudou.”

“ . . . with the shitsudou,” Rakushun echoed. Bitterness clouded his otherwise lively, young face. “In that case, the end of Kou is near.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” Youko asked.

It was the Imperial En who answered. “I would readily counsel as a colleague

with the Imperial Kou if man would agree to meet. Though even if we did, nothing can be done if he won't admit to the error of his ways. Our only remaining recourse is to hope that the rightful Empress of Kei accepts the Mandate of Heaven and fills the vacant throne. Why the Imperial Kou has meddled in the internal affairs of Kei, I do not know. But if the purpose was to put a puppet on the throne and lead her around by the nose, then only then will we see his ambitions wither and an end put to this insulting pretense."

His gaze fell on her. There was much more in his eyes that was left unsaid. Youko bowed her head. "Please give me time."

Part VIII

Chapter 60

[8-1] Youko was put up in a magnificent suite with a soaring ceiling. From the furniture to the water pitcher on the table, the interior décor had the indelible mark of fine taste and sumptuous luxury. The room was enormous, the glazed windows huge. The arrangements of flowers, the aroma of burning incense, would make the eyes of a peasant from the backwoods of Kou spin.

Having become accustomed to a pauper's accommodations on the road, Youko felt the same. She couldn't settle down. She wanted to retreat to her room and think things out, but the ornate, overstuffed chairs were uncomfortable. The lacquered table was finished with mother of pearl and would show even a fingerprint if she touched it. She hesitated even to sit there with her chin in her hands.

Glancing around the room, she saw another, smaller room, about ten feet by ten. Perhaps she could relax better in there. Then she approached the room and sighed.

The door partitioning the two rooms was folded back. The door was engraved with a delicate fretwork. As she stepped inside, the room became much bigger. Silk curtains hung down over a raised platform. The curtains were half open. Silk bedding covered the platform. That this ten-foot square room consisted of just a bed struck as some sort of bad joke. She couldn't think of lying on this thing. Sleep was out of the question.

With nothing else better to do, Youko opened the big window. The French doors reached from the floor to the ceiling. Stained glass filled the geometric patterns between the lattices. Beyond the doors was a wide balcony.

As the Imperial En had promised, her room faced a terrace that looked out over the Sea of Clouds.

When she opened the window, the salt smell of the sea drifted in. It was

preferable to the incense. She stepped outside. The terrace, covered with white stone, ran around the circumference of the building. It was about as wide as a small courtyard.

She walked along the terrace, leaned against the railing and gazed out at the Sea of Clouds. The big moon was sliding down the sky into the waves. Staring at the waves dashing against the rocks beneath her, she heard the sound of footsteps behind her. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw an animal with a gray coat coming toward her.

“Out for a walk?” she asked.

Rakushun grinned at the question. “So you can’t sleep either?”

“Yeah. You too?”

“How can you sleep in a room like that? Now I’m sorry I didn’t go back to the inn.”

“Same here.”

The rat laughed. “What are you talking about? You have a palace just like this one.”

The smile disappeared from her face. “Yeah, I probably do.”

Rakushun stood next to Youko and like her gazed out over the ocean. “The palace in Kei is located in Gyouten, Ei Province. It’s called Kinpa Palace, the Palace of Golden Waves.”

It didn’t peak her interest. She answered with a listless, “Huh.”

Rakushun was quiet for a moment. “You know, Youko.”

“What?”

“It’s most likely that Keiki was captured by Joei, the pretender.”

“So it seems.”

“If the Imperial Kou was really determined that you never take the throne, there’s one foolproof method.”

“Yeah, kill Keiki.”

“Right. If Keiki dies, you die, too. Because you haven’t climbed Mount Hou and accepted the Divine Decree, I don’t know what would happen to you. But that would probably be the end result.”

Youko nodded. “No doubt. It’s because I did that covenant thing with him and because I’m no longer a human being. That’s why I don’t get injured easily and why I can understand what people say. That’s why I can wield a sword and why I was able to cross the Kyokai. It’s all because of that.”

“Probably. Keiki is in the hands of your enemies. For your own good . . . ”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Youko.”

“No. It’s not that I think I’m above it all. I know what an emperor is, what a kirin is. That’s why I’m not going to make a decision like this just based on self-preservation.”

“But . . . ”

“I’m not being self-destructive.” She smiled. “When I came here, considering the state I was in, dying wouldn’t have come as much of a surprise. I somehow survived till now, probably more due to luck than anything else. I was as good as dead when I came here, so it’s not something I get all choked up about. At any rate, I don’t want to be the kind of person who gets all choked up about stuff like that.”

She paused and went on. “I don’t want this to be some rash, life or death decision. I know what everybody expects of me. But if I simply do what is convenient for everybody else, let everybody else determine what my life will be, then I won’t be shouldering the responsibility myself. That’s why I’ve got to think it over.”

Rakushun looked up at her with his jet-black eyes. “I can’t understand what you’re so confused about.”

“I can’t do it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I know just how mean and ugly a human being I am. I’m no empress.

I don't have it in me."

"That's not true."

"If you're a *hanjuu*, Rakushun, then I'm a hanjuu, too. I may appear human but I'm a beast inside."

"Youko . . ."

Youko gripped the railing of the balcony. There was a delicate beauty in the luxurious feel of the ornate stone. Casting her gaze downwards, she could see the lights of Kankyuu glowing like sea fire through the transparent water. The waves broke with a gentle rumble upon the shore. The extraordinarily sublime scene was far removed from what was in her heart. There was an equally striking palace in Gyouten, Kinpa Palace. To think of herself living there aroused in her not timidity but disgust.

That's what she told him. Rakushun sighed. "A emperor is just an ordinary person until he is chosen by the kirin."

"Being chosen by the kirin doesn't change anything. I'm the same person I was, stealing from people, threatening people, assaulting people when I had to. I trusted nobody. I was willing to trade your life for my own."

"The Imperial En thinks you can do it."

"He doesn't know what a miserable creature I am."

"I think you can do it. I'm the one you were thinking of finishing off, so if I say so, then it must be so."

Youko looked down at him, this rat who stood no higher than her stomach. He poked his head through the handrails and gazed intently at the ocean floating in the sky.

"I just can't . . ."

He didn't answer her murmured dissent, only continued to stare out at the Sea of Clouds. He patted Youko on the arm with his small hand. When Youko turned to him, the gray coat of his back was already to her.

"Rakushun."

“All this has left me at my wit’s end as well. There’s nothing wrong with being confused. Take your time, think about it.”

Youko watched as he walked off into the distance. He raised his hand, but didn’t turn around.

“Rakushun,” she said to herself, “even you don’t know everything about me.”

But I know.

This wasn’t the sound of her own voice echoing inside her skull. Her head shot up and she scanned the surroundings. But it wasn’t a sound she had heard with her ears.

You have not been alone. I have seen everything.

“Jouyuu?”

Accept the throne. You are capable. You are qualified.

Youko couldn’t answer. That he had spoken left her speechless. And what he said all the more so.

I have disobeyed the command of my lord. Forgive me.

Keiki’s instructions to him came back to her, “Be as if you are not there.” Was this why, until this moment, he hadn’t once responded to a thing she had said?

You thought me a monster, begged and whined for me to be taken out of you. That is why. This was an error on your part.

“I really am a fool,” she said to herself.

This statement went unanswered.

Chapter 61

[8-2] The next day, Youko was awakened by her lady-in-waiting. When she took her seat for breakfast, she shook her head, no, to the question on everybody's face. Rakushun came as a rat. He nodded and fluttered his whiskers. The Imperial En and Enki showed only small signs of disappointment.

The Imperial En said, some bitterness mingled with his words, "Your kingdom and your subjects are yours to do with as you wish. But in any case, I would like to see you reunited with Keiki. If you still intend to abdicate, that is another matter. At the very least, for the sake of the kingdom, you should want the Saiho back safe and sound. Do you not think so?"

Youko nodded. "I haven't come to any conclusion in my own regard but I don't object to rescuing Keiki. How?"

"We'll have to use force. Keiki is being kept in Sei Province in the midst of the pretender's army."

"If Keiki can be rescued, then can I go home? I am asking a simple question."

The Imperial En nodded. "Keiki can trigger a shoku. Because you have the constitution to cross the Kyokai, there would be no difficulty. Rightly or wrongly, if you wish to return and Keiki refuses, I shall have Enki carry it out."

A fair person, Youko thought. He could equally have threatened not to if she refused to become empress.

"Frankly, I'd rather not," said Enki. "When the time comes, get Keiki to do it."

The Imperial En glared at him. "Rokuta."

"Since you're playing dumb, I'll fill her in. Calamities occur whenever there's a shoku. If it's only a kirin crossing over, a windstorm, maybe. But in the case of an empress crossing over as well, we're talking massive destruction. It'll happen over there, too."

"In Japan?"

"Yes. Here *and* there. Because here and there are not meant to mingle

together. When you were brought *here*, the shoku caused widespread damage in Kou. Considering that it was royalty crossing the Kyokai, it was a pretty minor catastrophe. That's not bound to be the case next time. If it was up to me, I'd have no part of it."

"If I am able to go home, I wouldn't want to impose myself on Enki."

"Much appreciated," Enki said with a sardonic smile and a bob of his head.

The Imperial En spoke up in sterner tones. "Even if you do return to Japan, Youko, you will by no means be free from danger."

"I know."

As long as the Imperial Kou refused to relent, he could still send youma after her. Her return as well would likely cause natural disasters. Innocent bystanders would get caught up in youma attacks. She'd become a goddess of death. Here or there, going home would be no good for anybody. Yet even knowing this, she couldn't make up her mind.

"Do you think that before I go back, I ought to settle the score with the Imperial Kou?"

"That you cannot do. And I wouldn't help you in the least."

"You can't?"

The Imperial En nodded. "If nothing else, remember this. There are three sins an emperor can never commit. The first is to reject the Mandate of Heaven and stray from the Way. The second is to choose suicide rather than accept the Mandate. The last is to invade another country, even to suppress an internal rebellion."

Nodding, Youko said, "Yes, but what about you? What about invading Kei in order to take back Keiki?"

"If the Imperial Kei herself stands at the vanguard and leads the way then it will be done in her name. In that case, we are only answering her call and assisting her as her allies."

"Of course."

The Imperial En laughed heartily. "In order to secure Keiki's release, I shall

grant you the use of our Imperial Army. What do you say?"

Youko bowed, a thin smile on her lips. "If you wouldn't mind. I apologize for giving you nothing but reasons to be disappointed by my presence."

Enki scowled, then smiled. "Shouryuu wants there to be more taika emperors. But it's nothing to get worked up about. After all, up till now there's been only one."

"There's only one?"

"For the time being. There have been more in the past, though their numbers were never that great."

"Aren't you a taika, too, Enki?"

"Yes. And Shouryuu and Taiki. You make four."

"Taiki is the kirin of the Kingdom of Tai?"

"Yes. The *hinasa* of the Outland Kingdom of Tai.

"Hinasa?"

"A fledgling. A kirin who has not reached adulthood."

"Like you?"

"I am an adult kirin. When a kirin reaches adulthood, his outward appearance stops growing as well."

"In other words, you grew faster than Keiki did."

"That's it," he said, with no little pride in the fact. The Imperial En smiled to himself.

"So Taiki wasn't fully grown?"

"No."

"*Wasn't*, as in the past tense?"

Enki responded to Youko's question with a strained expression on his face. He exchanged glances with the En.

"Taiki died. At least, that's what was communicated to us. The Kingdom of Tai is in the midst of chaos. No one knows what happened to Taiki or to the Imperial

Tai.”

Youko sighed. “So it’s a bad situation, like in Kei.”

“Where there are people, there are complications. His name is Takasato. In human years, he would have been about your age.”

“A man?”

“The *ki* in kirin indicates a male. The Tai kirin was a beautiful black unicorn.”

“A black unicorn?”

“Have you ever seen a kirin?”

“Only in human form.”

“The coat of a kirin is an orange-yellow, the back variegated, the mane usually gold.”

“Like your hair?”

“Yes, but this isn’t hair. It’s really a mane.”

Makes sense, Youko thought to herself.

“The Tai kirin was black, the color of polished steel. The coat was jet black and the back silver. This variegation was rather unique.”

“Is it rare?”

“Indeed. In all our history, there’s nothing quite like the black unicorn. There have been red unicorns and white unicorns too, but I’ve never seen them.

“Huh.”

“If Taiki had indeed died, the Imperial Tai could be expected to pass away as well. The *Taika*—the fruit bearing the Tai kirin—should have appeared on Mt. Hou. But there’s no sign of it.”

“Taika?”

“The tree that bears the fruit of the kirin is on Mount Hou. When a kirin dies, at the same time, the ranka of the new kirin should begin to grow. If Taiki had died, it would become the next Tai kirin. In the case of a female, then *Tairin*, from the second syllable of *kirin*. The ranka is named according to the name of its

kingdom, in this case designated the *Taika*. However, there's no Taika to be found on Mount Hou. So he still must be alive."

"Don't kirin have parents?"

"No. Being a taika is beside the point. That's why kirin don't have names. Only titles."

"Keiki, too?"

Enki nodded. There seemed something quite sad about that fact. As if knowing what was on her mind, he put on a deliberately sullen face.

"The kirin are sad creatures. They live only for the emperor, have no parents or siblings, not even names. If the emperor chooses, he can work you half to death. In the end, you end up dying because of the emperor. And not even a grave awaits you."

Enki shot a look at the En. His lord turned the other way. Enki frowned and sighed.

"No grave?" Youko asked and Enki averted his eyes as if in self-reproach for having brought the subject up.

"You can't get somebody to prepare a grave for you?"

The Imperial En said with a forced smile, "It's not that he doesn't have a grave. Emperor and kirin are interred together. He means there isn't a body."

"Why?" Perhaps, she thought, because the kirin were supernatural beings, no physical body was left behind.

"That's enough of the subject for now."

Enki said, "Look, it's no big secret. The kirin employs the youma as his servants. The kirin and the youma make a pact. The youma who accept the pact promise to obey the kirin. In exchange, when the kirin dies, the youma get to feast on his body."

Youko looked up, first at the Imperial En, then at Enki. Enki shrugged.

"That's what it comes down to. Kirin sure must taste good. Anyway, I'll be dead by then, so I can't say I really care. If it seems a sad end to you, well, then

take good care of Keiki. Try not to let him down.”

Youko didn’t know what to say. So instead she said, “The Imperial Kou must not have feared causing Kourin similar distress.”

The Imperial En smiled sardonically. “Who knows what the Imperial Kou is thinking.”

Enki shrugged as well. “Interfering in the internal affairs of other kingdoms will lose you the Mandate of Heaven. Despite that, he couldn’t refrain from launching on this idiotic course. He must have a powerful reason.”

“You would think.”

“And yet, acting without a thought in their heads, save knowing that at some point they’ll have to face the music alone, humans go rushing in where angels fear to tread. They’re fools. The more it hurts, the less they think.”

His words hit home like a punch to the solar plexus. Youko could only nod. “It’s scary.”

“Scary?”

“Yeah. I can’t help feeling I’ve just caught a tiger by the tail.”

The Imperial En smiled softly. “The kirin cannot deny the emperor. But that doesn’t mean that he will do everything you say without objection. Never forget you’re just a dumb human. That’s the best way to let your other half help you out.”

“My other half?”

“Your kirin.”

Youko nodded. She glanced at the chair to her right. The sword was sitting there. The Suiguu-tou, the Water Monkey Sword, that could see the future and the present and what was far from her.

The Imperial En hadn’t said as much, but if she could control the sword, shouldn’t she be able to tell what the Imperial Kou was up to?

Chapter 62

[8-3] The kingdom had two armies. The provincial guard was entrusted to the province lords and garrisoned in their various locals. The Imperial Army answered directly to the emperor.

The regular cavalry would push toward Iryuu, the provincial capital of Sei in the Kingdom of Kei. This campaign would take a month. When it came to saving Keiki, a month was too long to wait. So it was decided that a combined squadron of a hundred and twenty elite horsemen, skilled at riding pegasi and other flying beasts, would be mustered for an aerial raid on Iryuu.

En and Enki left at once to make the preparations. They weren't back by lunch or supper. Leaving Rakushun to his own devices, Youko returned to her room. She placed the sword on the table and sat down in front of it.

She was lord of the sword. Although she understood this in theory, what it meant in practice perplexed her. It must be quite difficult. Still, she hadn't the slightest idea what to do, so it couldn't hurt to give it a try and see what happened.

She didn't know how to deliberately bring about a vision. But if all she had to do was call it forth, perhaps it wouldn't be that hard.

Long before she had come to this world, she'd seen the dreams and heard the sound of falling water. When she asked the Imperial En about it, he told her that those visions had undoubtedly been shown to her by the sword. Most likely, the sword had predicted the enemy attack and had been warning her about what was going to happen.

At the time, Youko hadn't yet met Keiki and hadn't covenanted with anybody. Yet the sword knew that she was its lord. *Before receiving the Mandate of Heaven, before being chosen . . .*

Explaining this to the Imperial En, he ventured in turn that perhaps she had been born with the Mandate of Heaven upon her shoulders. Or perhaps the burdens of the throne had become her own as soon as Keiki made his decision.

“Who knows?” Enki had chimed in. “I can’t say why I picked him. There weren’t any obvious *reasons*, except that he was the one.”

Enki said that a kirin chose an emperor by instinct. In any case, Youko didn’t think that communicating her intentions to the sword should be so difficult.

She extinguished the lights in the room, drew the sword from the scabbard, and stared at the blade.

Show me the Imperial Kou.

Up till now, the sword had showed her nothing but visions of her life in Japan. Youko had the feeling that it was because there’d been nothing else on her mind but the intent to return to Japan.

Show me what the Imperial Kou is up to. As she didn’t yet know her own mind, it could at least show her the mind of a fool.

The blade of the sword began to flicker with a phosphorescent light. Faint shadows played within the light. She heard the sound of falling water. She concentrated on the shadows, waited as the shadows coalesced into recognizable objects.

She saw a white wall. A glazed window. A yard. She recognized the yard. It was the yard of her house.

No, not this.

She focused her thoughts and the vision vanished. She looked at the dark blade in front of her eyes. She had failed.

“You’re not going to try this just once,” she lectured herself aloud. Again she stared at the blade. Before she hadn’t seen multiple visions on a single night, but sooner than she expected the sword began to glow.

Once again she found herself looking at the yard of her house. She didn’t let herself get discouraged. She concentrated on pushing her conscious thoughts away from the image in front of her. *Not this*, she repeated to herself like a mantra. The vision wavered like the calm surface of water when disturbed.

What appeared next was her room.

No.

And then her school.

No.

As many times as she tried, she saw nothing but the other world. Scenes of her house, her school, her friends' houses. Nothing of this world.

It's just like the scabbard, Youko thought. Toying with her the same way the blue monkey did. Still, she knew it was her fault as well, not being able to put old thoughts behind her. Knowing that, she didn't give up.

Patiently, trying over and over, she finally recognized a vision that came from this world. *At last!* she rejoiced. But then she recognized what she was seeing. The gates of a city surrounded by piles of bodies. The road leading up the gates soaked with blood. From among the fallen came wrenching moans. In their midst stood a young man with a dark expression on his face.

God, that's me.

"Stop!" she cried, hastily extinguishing the vision.

It was Goryou, where she had abandoned Rakushun. Even though she knew it was herself, she found her appearance astonishing. Had she really looked so miserable? She threw down the sword. Then conscious of how frightened she was of the sword, she laughed derisively.

But it's the truth, isn't it?

If the blue monkey were here, that's what he would tell her. This was the real world. She didn't have the right to avert her eyes. Better to face it head on. If she kept looking away she would never wise up.

Again she gripped the hilt. She steadied her breathing and concentrated on the blade of the sword. The gates of Goryou soon appeared. In the vision, her visage was suffused with malevolence. At a glance, she knew what she was thinking. She was looking at Rakushun, debating whether or not to kill him.

The guards came rushing out of the city. Youko beat a fast retreat. After running away, the vision wavered and changed. What next appeared before her was a mountain trail. Youko watched as she turned her back on the mother and child who had been so kind to her.

She saw Takki and the old man from Japan and the two men driving the horse cart who were devoured on the road from Hairou. She saw their weeping families. *It's the fault of the kaikyaku*, she heard them curse her.

She was shown the city of Kasai and the horrid aftermath of the attack by the youma. At Goryou, the bodies stacked up like cordwood. Refugees from Kei squatting at the foot of some wall outside some city somewhere.

Youko watched all these visions. She realized that if she tried to reject what the visions were showing her, they would rage against her all the more. If she accepted what they were showing her, the visions drew closer to what she wanted to see.

A palace, and in the palace, an emaciated woman.

"I wished no women to remain in Gyouten."

"But . . ."

That was Keiki, trying to voice a contrary opinion. Youko guessed that the woman was the Late Empress Yo.

"Criminals refuse an imperial order. Why do you hesitate administering justice to criminals?"

The only life left in the Empress Jokaku was in her eyes. She had the skin of a corpse, sunken cheeks, the tendons stood out in her neck, there was a sickly pallor all about her. Youko sensed these were the woman's last days. She must be suffering much to be that shrunken and skeletal. Despite the mounting pain and knowing the foolishness of her crimes, she was unable to stop herself from committing them.

Youko saw the ruin of the Kingdom of Kei. She thought Kou was poor. It was nothing compared to the destitution in Kei. She saw villages decimated by youma, the burning huts of the poor caught up in the conflagrations. The land and fields overrun with rodents and locust, rivers overflowing their banks, inundating the paddies with mud and sludge, countless bodies bobbing in the water.

This is the destruction visited upon a kingdom that loses its emperor.

“The kingdom will fall into ruin,” she had heard over and over. The stark reality of those words finally came home to her. Living in Japan, they would have meant very little. Here, she understood what she had been repeatedly told with such passion.

The next thing she saw was a mountain road.

Chapter 63

[8-4] There were two people on the road. One wore a dark shroud over his head like the Grim Reaper. The other had golden hair. They were surrounded by a horde of beasts.

“Forgive me,” said the golden-haired woman, her face buried in her hands. The same woman Youko had encountered on another mountain road.

That would be Kourin.

“I assume, of course, that you were begging *my* forgiveness.”

The Grim Reaper let the shroud fall from his head, revealing the deeply wrinkled face of an old man. He had a large stature that seemed at odds with his age. A brightly colored parrot perched on his shoulder.

“A helpless girl. It’s too bad we couldn’t finish her off. Though she shouldn’t last long wandering about in these mountains. We seemed to have miscalculated about whether or not she’d accepted the covenant.” The man spoke in a disinterested tone of voice, devoid of emotion. “Oh, well. She’ll die a dog’s death at the side of the road, or try to sneak into a village and be arrested. Either way, Taiho. Either way.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be upset if something like this happens again. No matter what, that girl must be exterminated.”

When the man said, “that girl,” he must be referring to Youko. That meant he was . . . *the Imperial Kou.*

“But such a weak-hearted thing. She does not have the constitution to be a great empress. You go all the way to Yamato and *that* is what you bring back?”

The man spoke to one of the beasts. It looked like a deer with only one horn. You could call it a “unicorn,” but only in overall appearance. The mane was a luxuriant gold, the coat a more subdued yellow. The speckled pattern of colors on its back resembled that of a fawn, though these were strange and fantastic

colors, glimmering faintly in the sunlight.

“Good fortune does not seem to favor your masters, wouldn’t you say, Kei Taiho?”

Kei Taiho . . . then that was . . . Keiki.

This is a kirin.

Youko recognized the mountainous location as the road she had traveled from Hairou. What she had taken then for Keiki had been Kourin. What Jouyuu had called “Taiho” had been Keiki in his kirin form.

Kourin said, “As she is a mere child, would it not be better to leave her to the elements? Two men of Kou have died. Please, can you not end all this?”

She looked up at the Imperial Kou, tears in her eyes. Youko had observed the same expression on her face at another time, in another place.

“All men die,” her lord answered. “Dust to dust.”

Even now, Youko did not perceive a flicker of humanity in him.

“Heaven will not countenance such actions. Sow the wind and Kou will surely reap the whirlwind. Your lordship shall prove no exception.”

“I have already reaped the whirlwind. You lecture me in vain. I’ve come to the end of my tether. Kou will fall. And when Kou falls, Kei will fall as well. As God is my witness, I will drag the Imperial Kei down into the depths with me.”

“How can you hate the taika so much?”

The Imperial Kou laughed a hollow laugh. “I don’t hate them. I find them disgusting. Did you know that in that other world, a child is born from its mother’s belly?”

“I know. But what has that to do with this?”

“Don’t you think it filthy?”

“I do not.”

“Well, I do. No taika born from a woman’s belly belongs in this world. They should stay where they came from.”

“Heaven does not agree. Else why should taika be chosen as emperors? What is filthy is to reject the Divine Will of Heaven.”

The Imperial Kou smirked. “So I gather we won’t be seeing eye to eye on this.”

“No, we shall not.”

“Still, I am your lord. You must follow my lead. Pursue her and kill her. She must not be allowed to escape Kou alive. Yes, the Imperial Army must be posted along the border with Kei.”

“Would it not be better to pay this unclean girl no mind? You call her a girl, you say she does not have the constitution to be an empress, then why would you resort to murder to keep her from the throne?”

“I will not have a taika emperor on the borders of my kingdom!”

Kourin sighed deeply. “What, then, do you intend to do with the Kei Taiho?”

“Give him to Joei. That’ll shut up the province lords.”

“It may silence them for the time being, but it will not allay their suspicions for long. With his horn sealed, the Kei Taiho cannot return to human form. He cannot even speak. What kind of Taiho is that? You must not continue in this manner. Heaven will surely not overlook such indiscretions.”

“I never said that it would.”

“You may be resigned to your fate, but you forget your people.”

“The people of Kou are an unlucky lot. After I die, the next ruler may be of better stock. If you take the long view of things, then perhaps it’s all for the better.”

“What are you saying?” Kourin again buried her face in her hands.

The Imperial Kou said in a blank, detached voice, “I was never meant to be emperor.” Perhaps he was already beyond hope, completely resigned to his fate. “Both you and Heaven chose badly.”

“This is not true.”

“True enough. My reign will end after only fifty years. En has stood for five hundred, Sou for almost six hundred. I am a mayfly compared to En and Sou, and

yet I have reached my limit.”

“If you changed your heart now, your reign would be much longer.”

“That ship has already sailed, Taiho.”

Kourin hung her head.

“This great task proved my stumbling block. I should have lived and died a provincial guard. Instead, I found myself blessed with this outrageous fortune when I was not in the least qualified to accept it. A scant fifty years was the best I could do.”

“Do not call it scant. The reigns of many emperors have been briefer.”

“So they have been. The late Empress of Kei, for one. And not just her. Kei has always been caught up in unrest. It’s fared far worse than Kou. Some of my subjects are ignorant enough to look at En and Sou and say how much poorer Kou is. But when compared to Kei, well, Kou is so much the better.”

“Neither En nor Sou were wealthy kingdoms to begin with.”

“I know. I did as much as I could. But for every step I take, the Imperial En and the Imperial Sou are two more ahead of me. And so Kou will be poorer than En and Sou forever. Simply put, I will never reach their level, never be their equal.”

“That is not so.”

“I can’t compete with En and Sou. But Kei is different. Kei is poorer than Kou. But if a new emperor were to ascend to the throne and Kei were to become wealthier than Kou, then what? Kou alone impoverished? And I, the prince of fools who made it so?”

“Will you lose the Mandate of Heaven over so slight a reason?”

The Imperial Kou did not answer the question. “Yamato is a wealthy country. Talk to the kaikyaku and that quickly becomes clear. The Imperial En returned from Yamato. His country is wealthy too. Taika are different from those of us born in this world. Seeing how wealthy the kingdom of that En taika is, why shouldn’t I fear the Imperial Kei? The taika know all the secret ways to rule a country. No matter what I do, I will never measure up.”

“You are talking nonsense.”

He smiled a faint, weary smile. “Yes, utter nonsense. I have come too far to back down now. And even if I did, the fate of Kou is set. Kou will go to ruin. I will die and when I do, the Kei taika too. We’ll all go down together.”

You fool. The words came unbidden to Youko’s lips, “What a jerk.” The vision vanished. Exhausted, she set down the sword. “How could someone do something so stupid?”

He didn’t want to get left behind. Rather than seeking the cooperation of his neighbors, he’d rather drag them down to his level. It happened all the time. In every time, in every place. In every world. But, still . . .

“If an emperor can’t give a moment’s thought to the suffering of his own people, he’ll do the unthinkable just in order to pull off a dumb stunt like this.”

How many people would get caught up in his machinations, how many would lose their lives? If Kou was destroyed, the damage would be unimaginable. Enki’s words echoed in her head. *People are idiots. And the more they suffer, the dumber they get.*

Flanked by the kingdoms of Kei and Sou—the Imperial En and the Imperial Sou never far from his mind—fifty years at the most, he’d said. But how long a time was that to him? This was a road she could just as easily head down as well. The Kingdom of Kei was in the same position as Kou, vis-a-vis En and Sou. Was it possible she could start thinking the same way the Imperial Kou did?

“This is scary,” she said to herself. “This is really scary.”

Chapter 64

[8-5] Youko went out onto the terrace for a breath of night air. She had a guest.

“Rakushun.”

He was gazing out at the Sea of Clouds. He glanced over his shoulder, waved hello with his tail.

“Can’t sleep?” she asked.

“I’ve been thinking about things.”

“Thinking about things?”

Rakushun nodded. “How to get Youko to change her mind, things like that.”

Youko smiled wryly. She joined him as she had the night before. She leaned against the railing and looked down at the Sea of Clouds with him.

“Can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Why do you want me to be empress?”

“It’s not a matter of me wanting. You are the empress. You’ve been chosen by the kirin. But you keep trying to abdicate. So I keep trying to think of ways to stop you. When an emperor turns his back on his country, it’s bad luck for both.”

“If I became empress, things would probably get even worse.”

“Not in this case.”

“Why not?”

“Because you have what it takes to do the job.”

“I can’t.”

“You can,” Rakushun said and sighed. “Even now, why do you think so little of yourself?”

“Because it’s not just about me.” Youko looked down at the waves crashing

against the shore. “If it were only about me, then sure, I’d give it my best and see what happened. That is, if the responsibility were all mine and I’d be the only one who’d end up dead when I really screwed up. That’s not the case here.”

“The people of Kei await the day when they can return to their country.”

“Sure, to a wealthy, peaceful country. That’s not something I can give them.”

“It’s not only about being chosen by the kirin. The Imperial En says anybody has the ability to become an enlightened monarch.”

“If that were true, then why is Kei in chaos? Why should Kou be? Even if that ability is there, it’s no easy task bringing it to the fore.”

“But you will.”

“Groundless self-confidence is arrogance.”

Reproofed, Rakushun bowed his head.

“This isn’t about my self-esteem. If you think that’s what my lack of self-confidence comes down to, then so be it. But I’ve got reasons for thinking so. I’ve learned a lot here, the most important of which, to put it simply, is that I’m an idiot.”

“Youko.”

“I don’t get any pleasure from putting myself down. I’m an honest-to-goodness fool. Knowing that much about myself, I’ve finally gotten around to searching out the less stupid parts of me. That’s what comes next, Rakushun. If I try my best and bit by bit make myself an even slightly better person, then it’d be worth it. If being chosen by the kirin to be an emperor is proof that you are a good person, then that’s something I ought to strive for. That isn’t me now. That’s me a long time from now, after I’ve become less of a dunderhead.”

I see, Rakushun muttered to himself. He let go of the railing and paced around the wide veranda. “You’re scared.”

“I sure am.”

“This big responsibility fell on your shoulders and you’re scared stiff.”

“That’s pretty much it.”

“Then you’d better hurry up and get Keiki back, Youko.”

When Youko looked at him, he was standing behind her, in her shadows. “You’re not doing this all by yourself. What do you think the kirin are there for? Why do you think Heaven made it so that the kirin chooses the emperor and not the other way around? You call yourself contemptible, you say that you’ve acted despicably. If you say so, then who am I to contradict you? But when Keiki chose you, those aspects of yourself must have occurred to him as well.”

“What are you saying?”

“Bring all the parts together to make the whole. You are insufficient by yourself and so is Keiki. Isn’t that why emperor and kirin exist together? A kirin is a kind of *hanjuu*, half-human, half-beast. You say you are, too. Two halves make a whole, don’t you see? The same way as with the Imperial En and Enki.”

Youko nodded.

“There are people who’d be ecstatic to become the emperor. Having the good sense to get a little intimidated thinking about your people means you have the qualities to sit on the throne.”

“That’s not it.”

“Trust Keiki.”

“But . . .”

“And trust yourself more. If it will take you five more years to grow into the crown, then why not start now? What’s there to be afraid of?”

“But . . .”

“Keiki chose you as empress. Right now, no one else on earth will look to anyone but you as the Imperial Kei. The Divine Will of Heaven is the will of the people. That means that no one else can bring about the happiness of the people of Kei. Don’t try to gulp all this down at once. The people of Kei are your subjects. By the same token, you are a subject of Kei.”

“Yeah, but . . .”

“If you wish to become a better person, accept the throne and become a better *empress*. Do that and you will become a better person, won’t you? The

duties of an emperor are indeed heavy. But isn't it better that way? The more responsibilities a person willingly bears, the quicker the soul is honed."

"And if I don't become this better person?"

"If you have the will to better yourself, you will, regardless. The kirin and your subjects will be your instructors. With so many teachers, you won't remain a fool for long."

For a long time, Youko stared silently at the sea. "If I become empress, I won't be able to go home."

"Do you want to?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

Youko nodded. "To be honest, life in that other world wasn't so great. I don't mind being here as much as I used to."

"Of course not."

"But ever since I came here, all I can think about is going back."

"I understand."

"My parents are there. My home, my friends. If you asked me, yes or no, are they good parents, are they good friends, I'd have a hard time answering. But it's not their fault. I was lacking as a human being, so the relationships I formed were lacking as well. If I went back, I think I could do it right. Start all over from square one, make a place for myself in the world. I really regret being such a jerk. That's why I'd like to have the chance to do it over again."

Her tears spilled down onto her hands, still grasping the handrail. "Even if I couldn't make it all right, even if that is not the world I truly belong to, I still miss it. I never said goodbye. If I'd had the time to prepare myself, I don't think it would hurt this much. I left it all behind without a single word of farewell."

"So you did."

"And not only that. I've been telling myself all along that I wanted to go home, that I was definitely going home. It's tough giving up what's kept me going this

whole time.”

“I know.”

“If I went home, I would regret it for sure. And if I don’t, I’ll regret it as well. No matter what I do, I’m going to hurt. I want both, but I have to choose only one.”

A soft, warm hand touched her cheek, wiping away the tears.

“Rakushun . . .”

“Don’t turn around. I’m not really presentable right now.”

She found herself laughing and crying at the same time.

“C’mon, don’t laugh. I can’t help it. My rat hands won’t reach.”

“I guess not.”

“You know, Youko. When you don’t know which choice is the best, then you should choose the path you *ought* to take, rather than the one you *wish* for. You’re going to regret the path not taken. But regrets being more or less equal, better the one where the regret is even a bit less.”

“I know.”

“And if you go with what you *ought* to do, then all that remains is the wishful thinking you had to give up to do the right thing. Such regrets should rest easier on the mind in the long run, shouldn’t they?”

“Yes.”

The hand clasped against her cheek was warm. “I really want to see what kind of kingdom you are going to build, Youko.”

“Thank you, Rakushun.”

Chapter 65

[8-6] On the day of the raid on Iryuu, Youko was given use of a flying horse called a *kitsuryou*. The kitsuryou had a red mane, white stripes covered its coat, and it had gorgeous golden eyes. Jouyuu knew how to ride a horse.

“You’re welcome to stay in Kankyuu,” said the Imperial En.

Youko didn’t agree. With as many as six thousand troops defending Iryuu, even one more rider could make a difference. Moreover, there was the matter of Keiki, not to mention that this was the business of the Kingdom of Kei. It would not do for her to stay hidden.

The Imperial En and Enki had ruled their kingdom continuously for five-hundred years. To face them and declare, “*I shall go forth*,” required as much courage as she could muster. She still knew almost nothing of this world, nothing of how a kingdom actually ran, nothing of its political structure. She hardly had the right to call herself an empress.

Which was why she had no choice but to go forth, despite how reckless it appeared. If war was what was called for, then to war she would go. And because she could only keep going forward once the ball started rolling, locking herself away in Gen’ei Palace was unacceptable.

Not only Youko, but Rakushun refused as well the safe haven of the palace. She insisted in the strongest terms that he remain behind, but he would not be cowed. Consequently, Enki said that Rakushun could be of use to him. They left together for Kei. A kirin could not abide bloodshed and Enki would not accompany them into battle. Instead, he and Rakushun would visit the provinces that had fallen to the pretender’s army and try to persuade them to see the reality of the situation.

A hundred and twenty beasts flew across the Sea of Clouds. The pretender’s army numbered twenty thousand. Of those, a good five thousand^[25] were concentrated in Sei Province. This, the Imperial En pointed out, was not a force a hundred and twenty could go up against.

“The objective is Keiki alone. If we can rescue Keiki then we can play for time. If we can sow doubt within the ranks of the pretender’s army, convince them that they are defending a mere pretender, then all the better. If only three of the province lords can be brought around, the tide will turn.”

The first step in that process was taking back Keiki. Youko asked, “Can we carry the day with only a hundred and twenty?”

The Imperial En laughed. “For the time being, the soldiers I have gathered may not be so great as to take on a thousand each. It is sufficient that they each be the equal of ten. Furthermore, Kei are thinly defended above the Sea of Clouds. They don’t have that many who can fight *and* fly. Our opponents are probably unaware that the Imperial Kei is in our care. I came to get you myself in order to keep them in the dark.”

So that was why the Imperial En had ventured all the way to Youshou by himself.

“And, well, I was curious about what kind of a person this Imperial Kei was. That’s why Joei is unlikely to believe that En would ever invade. Even if she did, coming over the Sea of Clouds with a cavalry of a mere one hundred and twenty, they won’t see us coming. After that, it all depends on you.”

“On me?”

“If you can turn the loyalties of the pretender’s army, it could be over quicker than we think. Few of your subjects will have any real desire to fight on Joei’s behalf. Once they understand that you are the rightful empress, they will hand over Keiki.”

Yeah, if I can only manage that, Youko sighed.

“Don’t doubt yourself. You are the empress. Never forget it. An actual monarch is something of a vainglorious concierge, but you should never let the people see through the facade. The face you put forward should always be that of the unquestioned person in charge.”

Youko sighed again. “Exactly how do I do that? Sure, easy if you happen to totally believe in yourself. But I don’t.”

“Ah, and there’s the rub.” The Imperial En laughed. “The way I figure it, the

kirin chose me, so if I've got a gripe about it, he's going to get an earful."

Youko looked at him, a bit taken aback. "That's the way to become an enlightened monarch?"

"So it is. At least it's gotten me this far. If I've got a beef about something, Enki will hear it. And even then, if I'm still not happy about it, I'll give it my best shot, anyway."

"That makes sense, I suppose. I'll keep it in mind."

What Youko saw of the Kingdom of Kei with her own eyes was far worse than the visions she'd been shown by the sword. Peering down through the transparent depths of the Sea of Clouds, she began to grasp the extent of the devastation of the countryside. At this time of year, rice seedlings should be visible on the surface of the paddies, but it looked like most of the fields had been abandoned and gone fallow. The roads were empty of people, the hamlets and villages still as death, burned to the ground, only the scorched and blackened ruins remaining behind.

She had thought Kou poor. It was nothing compared to the destitution of Kei. Her heart ached as the images piled up of refugees huddled together at the foot of the city walls. They surely all wanted to go home. She knew the misery of not having a bed of her own to sleep in at night.

The ground rolling by beneath them, they flew across the Sea of Clouds for half a day before arriving at Iryuu, the capital of Sei Province. In Iryuu as in Kankyuu, there was a high mountain whose peak jutted above the Sea of Clouds. One of the buildings at its peak was the palace of the province lord. Keiki was sequestered somewhere inside that palace.

While still a good distance from the palace, Youko saw a swarm of black shadows rising from the palace like a flock of birds taking to wing. The palace's airborne defenders.

To fight meant to kill. Up till now, Youko had killed everything *except* a human being, but only because she had not had the courage to take the weight of a human death upon her own shoulders. When she had decided to go forth, she resolved herself to the task ahead of her. It was not that noble ends justified taking human life any more lightly. She would remember forever her opponents

and the number of those she struck down. This, she understood, was as much as she could do.

“Are you ready for this?” the Imperial En asked.

Youko nodded.

“Keep your head about you. Losing the Imperial Kei now, just as she is coming into her own, that would be a tragedy.”

“I’m not so easy to kill. I don’t have the good sense to know when I’m defeated, you see.”

The Imperial En responded with a puzzled frown. And then smiled with his eyes. Youko drew her sword from its scabbard and faced the charging cavalry. The kitsuryou galloped unfaltering through the air. They plunged into the mist of the flying horsemen climbing up into the sky from the palace.

Chapter 66

[8-7] **A** solitary beast, imprisoned deep within the fortifications of the palace, shackled within a thick wall of netting . . .

“ . . . a kirin.”

This is a kirin.

An animal with a translucent golden coat and a single horn on its head. The kirin’s slender legs, like those of some species of deer, were bound in iron chains. The kirin looked at Youko with its deeply colored eyes. When she approached closer, it touched her arm with its slightly rounded muzzle.

“Keiki . . .”

At the sound of her voice, the kirin looked straight at her. It folded its legs beneath itself and prostrated itself at her feet. When she knelt and reached out her hand, it did not shrink back. She stroked its golden mane and it closed its eyes.

The other half of me. The beast who had delivered such a fate to her, who in that other world existed only in fairy tales.

Youko said, “I’ve been searching for you.”

The kirin brought its muzzle next to her knees. Several times, almost as if bowing to her, it nuzzled its head against her. Again, as she stroked its mane, she heard a hard noise at her feet, the sound of the chains binding it.

“Hold on. I’ll get those things off you.”

She stood and focused her attention on the shackles. Aiming the tip of the blade, she drove the sword straight down, severing the fetters. The kirin sprang nimbly to its feet but continued to chafe its head, specifically its horn, against her arm.

“What’s the matter?”

She looked closer and noticed a subtle pattern of designs on the horn, characters a hand’s breadth high in a reddish-brown color that looked an awful

lot like dried blood.

“Where did this come from?”

Keiki went on scraping the horn against her arm. Youko couldn't help but attend to this vexing behavior. Rakushun was a hanjuu and he could talk. In this world, where even the enchanted magical creatures could speak, should not the kirin, the preeminent of the sacred beasts, be capable of speech as well?

Now that she thought about it, she recalled the vision she had seen in the sword. Kourin had said something like, *With its horn sealed, it cannot return to human form and cannot speak.* When she lightly brushed her hand against the horn, the kirin calmed down. She scrubbed harder with her sleeve, lightly grazing the surface, but changing nothing else. Examining it more closely, she saw that the thin characters were etched into the horn.

A wound she could do something about. Youko took the jewel from her pocket. Applying the jewel and gently abrading the surface she saw the characters growing fainter. Repeating the process until the characters were almost imperceptible, she suddenly heard a voice at her elbow, a voice she hadn't heard in such a long time.

“Thank you.”

“Keiki?”

The kirin narrowed its eyes slightly and looked up at Youko. “Yes. I regret any undue hardships that may have been inflicted upon you in my absence.”

Youko smiled. She'd even missed that cool and composed tone of voice.

“Are you alone?”

“The Imperial En is lending a hand. The Imperial Army of En is holding off the pretender's forces.”

“I see.” He nodded, then called out in a strong voice, “Hyouki! Juusaku!”

The two beasts appeared, as if emerging from out of the walls. “We are here.”

“Go and offer your assistance to the Imperial En.”

The two beasts bowed deeply and slipped away.

“You are okay?”

“Of course,” the kirin said with a nod. His utterly unflappable voice was really quite amusing.

“So when your horn was sealed, your shirei were bound as well?”

The kirin answered with a self-conscious grunt. “You have learned a great deal. Yes, that is what happened. I am sorry for any trouble this might have occasioned on your behalf.”

“Jouyuu wasn’t bound so it didn’t affect me. What about Kaiko and Hankyo?”

“They are here. Shall I call them?”

“No, as long as they’re okay. But I’d like to meet them later.”

“That can be arranged.”

“Oh, come to think about it, I do have a request to make.”

“What is that?”

“I’d like you to reverse the order you gave to Jouyuu about keeping mum. I’m still not ready to do without him, though.”

The kirin looked at Youko and blinked several times. “You have indeed become a different person.”

“I have. Thanks to you and thanks to the *hinman*. Jouyuu was a great help. I’d like to say so personally, and there’s something else I’d like to ask.”

“A request you wish to make?”

“Yeah. How do you spell his name?”

The beast’s eyes opened wide. “A most peculiar request.”

“I suppose. But I haven’t really heard his real name. It’s been bugging me.”

As soon as Youko spoke, that unexpected sensation crept up her arm to her hand. Seemingly of its own accord, her finger wrote the characters in the air.

“The Useless (*Jou*) Assistant (*yu*).”

Youko smiled. “Thank you, Jouyuu, my Useless Assistant.”

The shirei serve the kirin, and by extension the emperor. There is no need to

thank me.

Youko only laughed. Looking at her, the kirin narrowed its eyes. “You truly have changed.”

“Yeah, it’s been a real learning experience.”

“To speak the honest truth, I did not think we would ever meet again.”

Youko nodded. “Same here. Say, can’t you turn back into a person?”

“I surely do not wish to appear naked before you!”

Youko had to smile at the shocked tone of his voice. “Well, then, I’ll get you some clothes. It’s about time we headed back. Before returning to Kinpa Palace, we’re going to crash at Gen’ei Palace for a while.”

She grinned and the kirin blinked again. Then he knelt down before her. With every movement, his back radiated an extraordinary luster.

He said, “I greet Your Highness bearing the Mandate of Heaven.” He lowered his head and touched Youko’s foot with his horn. “I shall never part from thee nor disobey thy decrees. My fealty I hereby pledge in covenant to thee.”

The whisper of a smile came to her lips. “I accept.”

This was, for Youko, the real beginning of her story.

From **THE CHRONICLES OF KEI**

The Annals of the Red Child

In the Spring of the Sixth Year of Yosei, the Reign of the Empress Jokaku, the Taiho Keiki fell grievously ill with the *Shitsudou*. The Capital Gyouten was ravaged by Fire and Pestilence. The Government waxed oppressive. Corruption and Calumny flourished. The Lamentations of the People cried out across the Land, saying: *The Gods of War will surely destroy Kei.*

In the Fifth Month of that Year, the Empress Jokaku repaired to Mount Hou and there sought Pardon from Heaven and renounced the Throne. And so she died and was buried at Senryou. Her Reign lasted Six Years. Following her Death, she was given the Posthumous Name *Yo*.

With the Abdication of the Late Empress Yo, Joei usurped the Throne. Joei falsely named herself Imperial Kei and entered Gyouten. The Kingdom was cast into Chaos.

In the Seventh Month of the Seventh Year, the Empress Youko, the Imperial Kei of the Kingdom of Kei, acceded to the Throne. The Surname of the Empress Youko was *Nakajima*, her Imperial Insignia was *Sekishi*, or the Imperial Child, also meaning the Red Child, she having been born a Taika.

In the Third Month of the Seventh Year, the Empress returned from Yamato. The Imperial En, Emperor Shouryuu, having answered her Petition, the Empress quelled the Rebellion at the Close of the Seventh Month, and deposed the Pretender, Joei.

In the Eighth Month of that Year, the Empress Youko ascended Mount Hou and there accomplished her Investiture. Her Name was

recorded upon the Census of Heaven, and she was granted the Title of *Imperial Kei*. The Imperial Kei re-interred the Late Empress Yo at Gyouten, appointed six new Ministers of State, and established the Government.

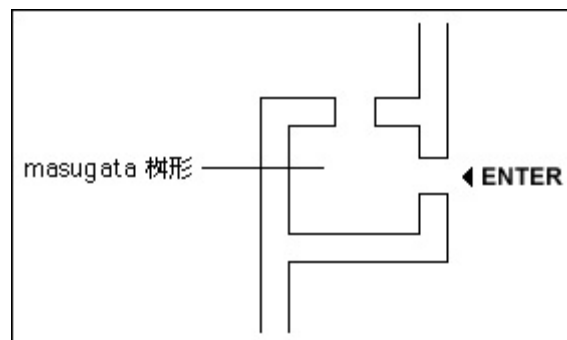
The Era of her Reign was designated *Sekiraku*, from the First Character of the Imperial Insignia and the Name of her Friend and Confidant, Rakushun. And so was inaugurated the Imperial Court of the Red Child.

Footnotes

1. The Catch-22 Youko finds herself in is not uncommon. High school regulations (*kousoku*) typically regulate the length of girl's skirts, the length of boy's hair, prohibit the wearing of jewelry and the coloring of hair. A student with hair that is not naturally black is often suspected of having dyed it, or is labeled a *haafu* (mixed race). [\[return\]](#)

2. The difference between public and private high schools in Japan is approximate to the difference between state and private universities in the United States. There is no open enrollment in either case; students gain acceptance primarily based on entrance exam scores. Over a quarter of students in Japan attend private high schools. [\[return\]](#)

3. Ono is describing a *masugata*, a simple defensive structure in Japanese castles that forced anyone entering the castle to turn at a right angle immediately upon passing through the gate. This prevented a headlong charge from breaking into the center of the courtyard, even if the outer gate was breached. [\[return\]](#)



(Courtesy of the Japanese Architecture and Art Net Users System.)

4. *Mochi* is a rice cake traditionally made by pounding steamed glutinous rice in a wooden mortar. Dried, it resembles hard paraffin; cooked it becomes a sticky, pasta-like starch. [\[return\]](#)

5. The *Setonaikai* (Inland Sea) is bounded by Honshu (the main island), and Shikoku and Kyushu islands. Hiroshima, at the southern end of Honshu, is the

largest port on the Setonaikai. The first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. The events Matsuyama is relating took place in July. [\[return\]](#)

6. Japanese emperors are referred to posthumously by the name of their era or *nengou*. The era name of Emperor Hirohito's reign (1926-1989) is *Showa* ("shining peace"), so he is now referred to as the Showa Emperor. The current reign of his son, Akihito, is called *Heisei* ("achieving peace"), though while living he is simply referred to as *Tennou* ("Emperor") or *Tennou Heika* (His Royal Majesty). [\[return\]](#)

7. Calendar years in Japan are counted according to *nengou*, the reign of the emperor, as well as the western (Gregorian) year. Japanese have no problem keeping track both of the current nengo and the Gregorian year, but referring to a previous nengou requires a bit of calculation. As 1926, the year of Hirohito's enthronement, counted as *Showa 1*, subtracting 1925 from the current Gregorian year determines the Showa year. So $1945 - 1925 = \text{Showa } 20$. [\[return\]](#)

8. The original reference is to the Japanese fairy tale *Urashima Taro*. One day while fishing Urashima Taro rescues a turtle. The turtle, it turns out, is kin to the Dragon King. As a reward Urashima is taken to the king's palace under the sea where he is welcomed by Princess Otohime and bestowed with every luxury a man can imagine. But eventually he grows homesick for his old life. As a going-away present, Otohime gives him a locket and tells him never to open it. When Urashima returns to his village, everything has changed. Although Urashima has been gone for only a few weeks, in the human world 300 years has passed. Curious, he opens the locket. In a flash, he turns into a very old man, for in the locket had been stored all his missing 300 years. [\[return\]](#)

9. Ono's more creative expression is *satori no youma*, or a demon who forces you to realize things about yourself and then feeds off this knowledge while it destroys you. [\[return\]](#)

10. Taishan or Mount Tai (the suffix *shan* functions the same in Chinese as *san* in Japanese). Taishan, also known as the Jade Emperor Peak, is one of the Five Sacred Mountains of China, which are also aligned along the cardinal directions. Except for the Mountain of Wormwood, the English transliterations are the same as Rakushun describes them here. [\[return\]](#)

11. Yamato is specifically identified with the historical period beginning in the 3rd century and ending with the establishment of the Heian (Kyoto) government in the late 8th century. [\[return\]](#)

12. The Kunlun Mountains in China run east to west along the northern edge of the Tibetan plateau. In Chinese mythology, the Kunlun Mountains are said to be a Taoist *Shangri-La*, and home to the Royal Mother of the West. [\[return\]](#)

13. *Han* is also pronounced *kan*, as in *kanji*, or “Chinese character.” It was during the Han Dynasty (202 B.C. to 220 A.D.) that China emerged as a world empire equal to that of Rome, with a consolidated political, military, and economic infrastructure. The Han today constitute the majority ethnic group within China, to the extent that “Han” is often used as a synonym for “Chinese.” [\[return\]](#)

14. The characters used to write The Kingdom of En and The Imperial En are different. The En in the former means *wild goose*; in the latter it is the root of the verb, *to prolong*. [\[return\]](#)

15. Although the prefecture (*ken*) in Japan can be analogized to the American *state*, prefectural governors in Japan enjoy far less autonomy than U.S. governors. The independence of the individual states, however, is checked by the limits imposed by the U.S. Constitution. That is, state law cannot supercede or annul federal law. [\[return\]](#)

16. A fender is a section of canvas, wood, rope webbing or old tires lowered over the gunwales to protect a boat from getting damaged when it pulls alongside a pier or another ship. Also known as a “camel.” [\[return\]](#)

17. “Under-girder” is a literal translation. These are shops built directly under the I-beam trestles that hold up elevated train tracks and roadways. They are common in cities where real estate is at a premium. The image below is of *under-girder* kiosks beneath the Keio line outside Kichijouji Station in West Tokyo. These are actual shops, not vending machines. Note the Nike swoosh on the left. It’s a shoe store. [\[return\]](#)



18. The characters for *Heki Rakujin* literally mean, “a deserter from the barricades.” Considering the events immediately prior to his being caught up in the shoku that brought him to the Twelve Kingdoms (explained further in the next chapter), Rakujin would seem to have chosen this unusual name with a certain self-deprecating irony in mind. Throughout Japanese history, people have changed their names to reflect changes in their life or philosophy, or with purely utilitarian motives in mind. The *Tokugawa* Shogun was born with the surname *Matsudaira* and purportedly changed his name in order to claim the more renown Minamoto and Fujiwara clans as ancestors. [\[return\]](#)

19. During student protests at Japan’s elite Tokyo University in January 1969, a group of hardliners barricaded themselves in Yasuda Hall until heavily-armed riot police were mobilized to evict them by force. [\[return\]](#)



20. Although Chinese and Japanese belong to completely different linguistic families, both grammatically and phonologically, Japanese scholars have been incorporating Chinese characters into the written language since the 5th century. Consequently, many Japanese and Chinese *kanji* are written similarly

and have similar meanings, much in the same way that English, primarily a Germanic language, shares many cognates with Romance languages due to the influence of Latin and the lasting effects of the Norman Invasion in 1066. [\[return\]](#)

21. In some quarters, the myth persists to this day that Japanese women come to term in ten months, not nine. There are several explanations for this. One is that the pregnancy is counted from the week of the last period. Tom Gally points out that in Japanese medical texts, pregnancies are counted in 10 months of 28 days, or 280 days. A typical nine-month pregnancy, in comparison, would be around 270 days, within the margin of error. [\[return\]](#)

22. An *azana* is an informal nickname adopted as a child or a formal nickname given by one's parents. I discuss the subject in more depth [here](#). [\[return\]](#)

23. A calligraphy brush. [\[return\]](#)



24. A *sumi-e* watercolor by Jan Zarembo. [\[return\]](#)



25. Just to clarify the reason for the 5000 number here and the 6000 number above; in each kingdom, there is an Imperial Army as well as the military units garrisoned by each province (i.e., the National Guard). This means there are 5000 imperial troops stationed in Sei, plus a sufficient number of provincial soldiers to bring the total to 6000 in Iryuu alone. [\[return\]](#)